

The God of Story

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Dissertation submitted for the

Doctor of Theology program

Kairos University

Certification Page

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Introduction

My Summer on Mars

No one believes me when I tell them I've been to Mars.

It happened during the summer of 1977, just after I graduated from the fifth grade.

My father had taken a job as the project manager for a massive building project in downtown Tulsa. Dad didn't want to spend the whole summer separated from his family, so he bought a Coleman camper and told us to pack what we needed for a summer in Oklahoma.

To me this meant a baseball glove and a stack of books. Just before leaving town I discovered *A Princess of Mars* in a friend's basement library and was fortuitously sent off on my journey with a grocery bag full of old pulp novels.

We landed at a KOA outside the city limits, beyond even the suburbs, a quarter mile from the highway. The place felt like mars to me: brutally hot days and cool, breezy nights; a barren landscape of sharp-edged rocks and fine dust that swirled underfoot and clung to the air; a sea of red stretching to the horizon. From the porthole window of my narrow top bunk above the 18-foot camper's tool chest and spare tire, I could see the rim of a dry canal bending into the distance.

Fortunately, our environmental shelter came equipped with air conditioning and a built-in reading light, making the transition from earth to Barsoom ridiculously easy. For eleven weeks I whiled away the hours surrounded by books written by a man who had taken so many readers to

Mars that they eventually named a crater after him.

Edgar Rice Burroughs is best known as the creator of *Tarzan of the Apes*, but his *John Carter of Mars* series was far more intriguing to me than his jungle hero.

Since that miraculous summer I have re-read *A Princess of Mars* several times, always hoping to recapture a little of the magic. I am always disappointed. The book simply wasn't written for a 21st century adult.

But it's not just Edgar Rice Burroughs who disappoints. Few of the stories that engaged me as a child hold my interest now. I am too cynical, too fat with stories, too old for the common wonder of childhood.

I wish I could re-enter the fantastical places I slipped into so easily when I was younger. I wish I could go to Mars again. But growing up has consequences.

As your brain develops, you find different things appealing. The desire for wonder is supplanted by a drive for romance and sex, for human drama, and for insight into the nature of things. Life experience begins to hammer home the painful differences between fantasy and reality. In short, the kinds of stories you crave become more logical, more informative, more true to life.

This, as I said, is disappointing. I *want* to believe in the green men of Mars and their tusky cavalries. I want to ride a sky ship and bound across the Martian soil with a six-legged dog named Woola. I want to be insanely good with a sabre in spite of the fact I've never actually taken lessons or even held one.

But I am old enough now to have learned that life isn't like that.

Which could lead me to the tempting conclusion that life is an existential letdown. The future was supposed to be better than this. More awe-inspiring. More evolved. I was promised a

jetpack and regular vacations to the moon. Instead, life handed me a second mortgage and a brochure about the need for regular colonoscopies.

Is it, then, all a trick? Are fairy tales just the soft lies we tell children to protect them from truths they are not yet prepared to face? Was the innocence of childhood nothing more than a happy dream?

This book is my attempt to answer that question fairly, and with great hope.

I hope to demonstrate that all stories—even the dreamy fantasies of childhood—point to something bigger than “Nature, red in tooth and claw,”¹ and that, properly understood, the language of Story is the language of Scripture.

Stories are important because they demonstrate that ultimate meaning exists.² Not only does it exist, but it is sometimes wondrous, often horrifying, and occasionally funny.

This book was written for everyone who was been to Mars, or Narnia, or Middle-Earth, and discovered you were more at home there than you are here.

This book was written for everyone who longs for home.

Part I

Story's God

1

The Great Pyramid

THE LANGUAGE OF STORY

American Evangelicals have a story problem.

Because story lies at the heart of Christianity, this problem represents an existential crisis.

Yet few are even aware that a crisis exists.

Put simply, we do not understand how stories work. We neither study nor teach the language of Story, nor do we recognize the foundational truths embedded in its grammar. We don't appreciate the role story plays in human development, and we barely acknowledge its importance to the shaping of culture. Somehow the church has forgotten what we once took almost for granted—that life is a story.

If life is a story, it can only be rightly understood in story terms. But how are we to understand those terms when we consistently disregard and devalue them?

It's no secret that Evangelicals have largely abandoned the arts—not as consumers, but as creators. Consequently, our attempts to use the language of story as a delivery mechanism for the gospel have about as much emotional impact as a doctor's needle.

Our sermons, community dramas, religious novels, and Christian films often reject subtlety in narration and instead mount an assault on the rational mind that is direct, clear, and lifeless. Rather than pursue Thomas Aquinas's coherence of beauty, goodness, and truth,³ our storytellers project sterile, propositional truths stripped of goodness and beauty. Such stories are

virtually useless when it comes to conveying the gospel of Christ to the culture.

Furthermore, our naive approach to story as a needle-and-serum delivery mechanism of two components, story and message, leaves us vulnerable to the subtle manipulation of secular storytellers, who are often quite adept at utilizing narratives to persuade, manipulate, and control. Ever on the lookout for toxic injections of bad messaging, we inflate the danger of movies and books with a transparent political agenda while overlooking the more insidious content that can subtly reshape an audience's worldview through a deft use of ideals.⁴ Somehow we've forgotten that the serpent was more crafty than the other creatures.⁵

Maybe the worst thing about our failure to learn and to teach the language of story is that we don't understand our own scriptures. The Bible is not written in just Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. It is also written in Story. Its layered narratives, metaphors, and poetic images are endlessly rich, its structures and arcs and semiotic connections profoundly meaningful. They are indeed "treasures"⁶ worth seeking. But unless we learn to see the scriptures through this third window—unless we humble ourselves as little children begging for a story—we will never fully understand the depths or the elegance of God's word. Theologian Leonard Sweet writes:

Story is the flesh and blood of life. And the body of Christ needs to be fed with the stories of the gospel—stories that shock and stories that twist around our self-concerned notions and expectations and leave us naked, confused, witless, and willing to let God lead us into new pastures.⁷

This book is therefore an attempt to explore what we seem to have forgotten. Part one outlines the basic grammar of storytelling, and part two uses these elements as tools to analyze the narratives of scripture.

Such a structural pattern is deeply personal to me because it mirrors so much of my journey as a young Christian navigating the academic world.

Though I was raised in a devout Lutheran home, it was not until I lived off-campus during my undergraduate studies at the University of Kansas that I encountered Christ personally. My grandfather had just passed away from cancer (and it had terrified me to see his once-imposing frame shriveled down to a ninety-pound husk); then my father had a series of strokes and heart attacks that left him fighting for his life at a local hospital. The doctors told us he would not make it. While he was still speechless and barely conscious, I received similarly grim news, a diagnosis of spinal cancer that needed further confirmation. Back then the waiting list for an MRI was several months long, so I spent the interim reading religious texts in the hope of finding some sort of consolation.

I read *The Bhagavad Gita* and *The Upanishads*. I read Lao Tzu and Confucius. I read many New Age writers, including Richard Bach and others who claimed to have secret knowledge of the afterlife. At one point I even read newsletters from the Rosicrucians.

This was well before such information was easily accessible online; the university library still used an enormous cabinet for its card catalog, and enrollment involved punch cards. None of it helped, though it did broaden my horizons enough to reinforce how little I knew about anything. I had spent years training to be a martial artist and was physically fit and mentally agile. Just weeks before my whole life had stretched ahead as an implied promise of marriage and children and career. I knew how things were supposed to unfold, and though I understood that sometimes tragedy strikes, the reality that my hopes and dreams, and even my life, could be stripped away so quickly overwhelmed me.

One evening at a particularly low point—I was alone in an off-campus apartment—I reached for the Bible my other grandfather, a Lutheran minister, had left me. Flipping to the words in red, I began to read them as if for the first time.

What struck me with particular impact was the contrast between everything Jesus said and everything I had been reading. Lao Tzu, Confucius, Bach, and all the rest spoke as if they were good men with good ideas. But Jesus spoke like he *knew* something. His words had a weight that continually made me stop reading, as if I could only carry them for a few minutes before taking stopping to rest.

Two things I read that night struck me with the force of a sledgehammer. The first was Matthew 5:27-18: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

I was a young man at a state school surrounded by over twelve thousand young women who were themselves exploring adulthood. I wasn’t supposed to notice the short skirts and tanktops? How could any normal, hormonal nineteen-year-old guy regulate his imagination so strictly that he never entertained sexual thoughts? And what sort of God was this who applied such a harsh, seemingly impossible standard? Hadn’t he made me the way I was?

But when I continued reading, I came across Mathew 11:11 and had to stop again. “I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not yet risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

I knew about John the Baptist. The church I’d attended growing up boasted a stained-glass window depicting his beheading. If Christ’s first standard about lust had been outrageous, this one was more so, but in the opposite direction. Somehow I understood not the theology of this promise but the beauty of what lay behind it: following Jesus would elevate me above even the most holy of ancient prophets. I was being asked to surrender all of the things that made me what I considered myself, and in exchange I would have—what? Well, Jesus, I supposed. That was the deal. Lay down my old life; pick up a new one. What I’d be letting go would be my right

to things like lust and pride and preferring my own way. What I'd be receiving would be ...

I wish I could say that I saw all of this clearly, but the truth is, my discomfort was more the conviction of a problem than the assurance of a solution. I did not decide to follow Jesus because I believed in him. I decided to follow him because I realized that it was either him or nothing.

With no understand of a “prayer of salvation” I knelt on the cheap carpet and said, as best I can recall it: “Jesus, I don’t know if you’re there or not. I just know that if you’re not God, there is no God. It’s you or nothing. So I’m going to spend my life following you, even if you’re not there. The thing is, I’m a hypocrite, and I know I will never make it on my own. If you *are* there, I need you to help me. I want to be the least in your kingdom. Make me your water boy.”

That last request made sense to me at the time because I felt such overwhelming unworthiness. Who was I to take the same field as John the Baptist or the disciples? But a water boy? A water boy was only in the dugout because he knew somebody. He didn’t have to be talented or athletic.

I suppose I expected God to hear me, but in my imagination, prayer was like leaving a message on God’s answering machine. It was something he took note of, perhaps much later, and either tossed in the trash or nodded at begrudgingly.

To my astonishment, the Spirit of God descended into that room so forcefully that it took my breath away. I saw no visions and heard no angelic choirs, but I could feel the peace of God like a weighted blanket draping over me, and the heaviness of it pressed me into the floor. *He’s real!* I thought. *He’s really real! And he’s here! I can’t believe it!*

Like Nathanael, I did not believe in Jesus until I met him. And then everything changed. I started going to a young men’s discipleship group, and then to church. I began reading

the Bible and trying to pray. And I started asking awkward questions in my English classes.

For the next few years I lived not a double life, but a parallel life. I lived as a pariah in the academic world—the born-again Christian who found postmodern literature to be meaningless and depressing—and in church circles I was the college writing nerd who did not understand why the stories in the Bible had to be read in the most lifeless way imaginable. So I learned to move quietly between the contrasting cultures of academia and *ecclesia*, of hopeless entertainment and befuddled expectation.

It took me decades of study and prayer and meditation to begin to understand what lay at the heart of this division.

The world has forgotten that stories work because they point to God, to the sender of ultimate meaning. The basic elements of every story are whispering to us, in narrative form, about a reality that is larger than a purely material cosmos.

Evangelicals have forgotten that before it is anything else, God's story is a narrative, and that to be understood the Bible must be experienced as such.

What both groups need is to be baptized in the language of story.

The Great Pyramid

Most readers will already be familiar with the five most commonly used story elements: characterization, plot, context, theme, and voice. But each of these concepts is more significant than even your high school English teacher may have led you to believe. Not only do they inform and shape our maturation into adulthood, they also connect us with the generations that came before us and those who will follow after. Story grounds us in history.

The perennial elements of Story form an emotional grammar that points both to human

experience and to a divine origin. Because the elements exist wherever stories are told, they are useful—indeed, they are essential—in crossing the gulf of time that separates modern readers from biblical stories. The ancient Hebrew- and Greek-writing authors who crafted the scriptures may have lived with different cultural values, recognized different character archetypes, and assumed different contextual themes than we do, but it is inarguable (and wondrous) that they told stories built around settings, characters, and themes. The story of King Solomon, for instance, shares profound structural similarities with Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.⁸

In *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall describes the ubiquity of Story throughout history:

No matter how far we travel back into the literary history, and no matter how deep we plunge into the jungles and badlands of world folklore, we always find the same astonishing thing: *their stories are just like ours*. There is a universal grammar in world fiction, a deep pattern of heroes confronting trouble and struggling to overcome.

But there is more to this grammar than the similarities in skeletal structure; there are also similarities in the flesh. As many scholars of world literature have noted, stories revolve around a handful of master themes.⁹

The fact biblical narratives work as stories—and are understandable as such—provides us with what may be our greatest interpretive gift. Yet it is a gift that remains largely unopened.

Perhaps this reluctance to explore the biblical narratives as stories shouldn’t be surprising. Humans, after all, have a talent for dismissing anything that doesn’t align with our existing assumptions, no matter how obvious or colossal its presence.

The Great Pyramid at Giza, for instance, stands clearly visible for miles. Yet it was largely misunderstood for over fifteen hundred years. Napoleon Bonaparte led an expedition to Egypt in 1798 that marked the first major attempt to understand the structure as designed. The

entrance lay hidden by sand, with only the corner steps carved from bedrock indicating the pyramid's base. When Napoleon ordered 250 soldiers and hired workers to start digging, the entrance was eventually exposed, thus permitting the clearing of the pyramid's Descending Passage and chambers.

After making his way up into the King's Chamber, Napoleon asked to be left alone for a while. He is reputed to have been unwilling or unable ever to answer those who asked him what he had experienced.¹⁰

Not long thereafter, another explorer, Giovanni Belzoni, uncovered what was then an unknown entrance to the second "Khafre" pyramid based on his observations of the first. Belzoni's team cleared enough debris that he was able to make his way into the inner burial chamber. Unlike Napoleon, he put his experience into words:

I reached the door at the centre of a large chamber. I walked slowly two or three paces, and then stood still to contemplate the place where I was. Whatever it might be, I certainly considered myself in the centre of that pyramid, which from time immemorial had been the subject of obscure conjectures of many hundred travellers, both ancient and modern.¹¹

No amount of digging, however, could untangle the mysteries of the strange writings carved into the walls of the buildings at Giza. The ability to read hieroglyphics had died out in the 4th century AD¹² and would not be relearned until well after the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, which occurred in 1799 during this same Napoleonic expedition.

The Rosetta Stone provided the key to hieroglyphics because it presented nearly identical information in three separate languages: Ancient Greek, Demotic, and Hieroglyphic script. Still, it took several decades before scholars were able to confidently begin to translate the Giza inscriptions. Meanwhile, some explorers rejected what they found written on the walls and ceilings and pillars because when looking at hieroglyphics they didn't see text.¹³

Egyptologist Mark Lehner points out that, “the Egyptians did not distinguish sharply between hieroglyphic writing, two-dimensional art and relief carving, sculpture and monumental architecture. In a sense, the pyramids are gigantic hieroglyphs.”¹⁴

In other words, for over fifteen hundred years nobody in the world really understood the looming structures at Giza, even though their purpose was deeply meaningful on multiple levels. An ancient treasure—too large to miss—glowed and glowered in the desert sun, its slope perfectly mirroring the angle of sunlight breaking through clouds, its inner walls decorated in coded written language, sculptures, and elaborate carvings, but not a single human knew that the Great Pyramid was actually *for*. And why?

Because its foundation was hidden and its foundational language was forgotten.

These two facts are metaphorically significant.

We Evangelicals are a lot like the generations of travelers and tourists and collectors who visited Giza before Napoleon. We puzzle faithfully over the hieroglyphic patterns of scripture, sensing that something deeper must have been intended but unable to read the writing on the wall. We hold up the Bible as an artifact of sacred history, the colossus of our faith, but do not venture inside.

In truth, we *can't* crawl into its inner chambers because we lack the necessary tools. We don't recognize the corner steps or the markers of the subterranean entry. Without the language of Story, we cannot read its true meaning, or even recognize that our Great Pyramid *is* a hieroglyph. The Bible is not just a collection of stories. It is *the* story—the one true story to which all are invited.

This is the nature of our problem: we lack the ability to recognize that we lack an ability. We think we understand Story, but we don't.

The Language of Story

Very well. We must start somewhere. To understand the depth of our story problem and how to correct it, we must first answer the question, *What are stories for?*

This is no small task.

Narrative theorists tend to propose answers based on evolutionary processes. Some argue that story is a tool of sexual selection; others that it is a method of transmitting culture; still others that it has no meaning at all but is merely a form of chemical addiction, more vestigial tail than asset. These theories all assume that Story is a tool for survival. Jonathan Gottschall, echoing the work of child psychologists, suggests that, because stories are almost always about people with problems, they probably exist as virtual tests for future situations.

Just as flight simulators allow pilots to train safely, stories safely train us for the big challenges of the social world. Like a flight simulator, fiction projects us into intense simulations of problems that run parallel to those we face in reality. And like a flight simulator, the main virtue of fiction is that we have a rich experience and don't die at the end.¹⁵

According to this idea, Story prepares us to deal with real world situations by forcing us to imagine them in advance. This is why Story can be reduced to a simple definition like Gottschall's:

Story = Character + Predicament + Attempted Extraction¹⁶

Or, to put it like a creative writing teacher, every story is about a character who is searching for the solution to a problem.

As a writer I sometimes find this definition useful because *problem* and *solution* are really just different ways of saying *conflict* and *resolution*, the end points of every plot. But if

this definition merely means that all stories must have a **character** and a **plot**, it isn't saying very much—and it is leaving out **theme**, **voice**, and **context** (which is often referred to by the more specific term, *setting*).

Gottschall's equation is therefore too reductionistic for our purposes here. Any story boiled down to a problem/solution pattern will not retain its power. That I once ran out of gas and had to walk to the nearest filling station is an anecdote, not a story. Though it is built around a protagonist seeking the solution to a problem, it lacks voice, setting, and a motivating force, which robs it of theme. Had I run out of gas and then braved a minefield in order to take a child to safety, I might have the basis of a story. The difference is not just complexity, but the presence of other essential elements that add dramatic tension and therefore interest. Yes, you can make lemonade with just lemon juice and water, but without sweetener is it really lemonade?

But there are two larger problems with the idea that Story is an evolutionary flight simulator.

First, enduring stories rarely provide the precise solution to a precise problem. Though it's true that in a story the problem of a dragon may require the solution of a St. George, this pattern is not what such stories are *about*. Instead, the problem/solution pattern exists to introduce the necessary endpoints of plot, *conflict* and *resolution*. You can tell this is true by asking if the solutions found in most stories would work in real life. Is the solution to poverty, for instance, that I sell my last cow and buy magic beans from a stranger? Is the problem of wicked stepsisters best solved by the appearance of a fairy godmother? Are saints really the best people to handle real-world dragons?¹⁷

Second, if stories are just survival-based flight simulators for reality, why do stories usually have at their heart some moral dilemma that directly opposes the concept of "nature red

in tooth and claw?" I do not mean that good stories moralize. I mean that all stories depend on the existence of a moral compass shared by storyteller and audience.¹⁸ Without such a compass no story can make sense. It is this compass that dictates the true theme of a story; whereas the compass is always relevant, a problem and its solution are generally *least* effective where they are clearly mirrored in reality.

In fairy tales, what makes a problem effective dramatically is not that it's solved by some practical, everyday wisdom, but rather that it's solved through some moral but impractical decision. *Jack and the Beanstalk* isn't about fixing one's finances. Its hero doesn't demonstrate a practical way to survive starvation. Instead, the story shows us what courage looks like: the courage to risk everything on a dream of magic; the courage to climb an impossible ladder into the clouds; the courage to plunder the domain of the powerful when everything is stacked against you. *Fee, fie, foe, fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman!* Is memorable because of its rhythmic near-rhyme, but its meaning is simple: Jack smells like an Englishman because he reeks of courage. Courage is in his blood. (Though if it were truly in the blood, would English boys need a story reminding them of the fact?) Jack's courage is reckless and foolhardy and absolutely impractical. Yet we admire it. Why? Because we recognize in it a virtue that is worth seeking—even at the cost of one's life.

This is why I say that effective stories don't serve as flight simulators for life, showing us how we must behave in order to survive. Rather, they show us how we *ought* to behave even if the consequences turn out to be deadly. If Story is a flight simulator it is a terrible one, for it is telling us to land the plane upside down.

So, what *is* Story for if not survival?

Stories exist to preserve and communicate truths that are counter-intuitive or contrary to

our natural inclinations. They function as vaults for the safeguarding of meaning and of moral precepts. They communicate ideals like courage and honesty which are *not* explicit in nature and which are therefore easy to overlook, misunderstand or devalue.

Stories tell us that life is meaningful, and at their best they show us how to go about finding that meaning for ourselves. But their method of doing so is neither deductive nor formulaic. Instead, they teach through indirect emotional resonance, or what C. S. Lewis called “classes of experience.”¹⁹

Every story is a journey of exploration that works through a three-part progression of *entertainment, concealment, and revelation*. These three traits are how stories preserve and communicate the sorts of truths most challenged by the struggles of life.

ENTERTAINMENT: Before a story can transform us, it must engage our emotions.

Stories always have as their first and primary goal to entertain and delight. Boring stories fail as stories for the simple reason that they do not stimulate the emotions. By definition boredom is the lack of stimulation. Thus, if a story does nothing else in terms of solving a problem or communicating truth but still brings enjoyment to the audience, it has succeeded on its most basic level. Many commercially successful stories aim no higher than this. How many television programs might be described as ‘junk food for the mind,’ temporarily filling but empty of nutritional value? Yet they are in fact stories. That some tales aim no higher than making the time pass enjoyably is nothing to sneer at.

CONCEALMENT: Great stories are like vaults. They conceal truth in order to make sure it is valued and protected and kept out of the hands of the wrong people. In this case the ‘wrong people’ for a story might be children or outsiders or even those for whom it is eventually intended, but not yet. Like Christmas presents hidden in a parent’s closet, some truths are best suited for a future date. The story that conceals its theme in the actions of the characters and the development of its plot

ensures that it will linger in the audience's mind. The head-scratching nature of a well-designed story invites the truth-seeking audience to ponder it and search for its meaning. This process means the story survives longer and is passed down. Those who finally understand what has been hidden inside will delight in telling it to others. Thus it is preserved.

REVELATION: Finally, stories reveal truth by presenting it as drama which proves through action, albeit imaginary, some premise or larger truth. The parallel nature of story allows the storyteller to create what fantasy writer Diana Wynne Jones describes as "a mental map—in bold colors or stark black-and-whites—of right and wrong and life as it *should* be."²⁰

Stories, in other words, are like the pyramids at Giza—simultaneously explicit and cryptic.

As I write this chapter, I see that yesterday the USPS dedicated a Forever Stamp to Shel Silverstein's book, *The Giving Tree*. I've been aware of the planned stamp since I stumbled across several angry reactions to it a few months ago.

Most of these objections stemmed from readers who thought the story either encourages deforestation or selfishness. Readers are free to make of it what they will, of course, but these conclusions don't follow from the story. *The Giving Tree* hides its theme most effectively from those who aren't ready to wrestle with the idea that true happiness comes from giving unselfishly.

Fairy tales, too, are often examples of strong but subtle storytelling. They typically conceal their theme in a way that ensures it is passed on from generation to generation.

Cinderella, for instance, buries its life experience in layers so charming and elemental that its point can be easy to miss even by those who love it the most. One way to get at the theme of any fairy tale is to recount the most memorable points of its plot. When I do this with live

classes the results are almost always identical for *Cinderella*:

1. Wicked stepsisters and a forthcoming ball.
2. The fairy godmother and the magic coach, dress, etc.
3. “Don’t stay past midnight.”
4. The magic wears off and she loses a glass slipper.
5. The prince identifies her when her foot fits.

Two questions about these highlights suggest a theme. First, how does the story actually resolve? And second, if the magic ends at midnight, why is the slipper still there?

Clearly the story resolves when Cinderella marries the prince—and finds suitable husbands for her wicked step-sisters, who are transformed by her generosity. Therefore it is likely that the point of the fairy godmother’s magic was to bring together two people from different stations who could not otherwise have married.

This in turn suggests an answer to the second question, which is that all of the magic certainly *doesn’t* end. The part which brings them together (the single glass slipper) remains. Therefore the theme of *Cinderella* might be something like: The magic of love doesn’t last, but it does reveal what’s truly there.

Cinderella, like other great fairy tales, is probably not trying to present a theme so clear and simple as this. But such exercises are useful in helping us catch a glimpse of the King’s Chamber at its heart.

Little Red Riding Hood is another helpful illustration. Its plot highlights are typically recalled as follows:

1. Red’s encounter with the polite wolf.
2. The wolf runs ahead and swallows grandmother.
3. The wolf in grandmother’s nightclothes.
4. “What big eyes … ears … teeth!”

5. A woodcutter rescues them.

Three questions will prove instructive: How does the story resolve? Why doesn't the wolf eat Red sooner? At what point are children in the audience most enthralled?

This last question is helpful in explaining why the tale relies on a *deus ex machina* ending (in which the main character is helped out of her situation by an outside force). *Little Red Riding Hood* doesn't draw its power from its plot, but from its cleverly concealed theme. That theme is most evident at step four, where an audience of children is most engrossed in Red's unfolding horror. *They* know it's a wolf, but Red doesn't. So children are gripped by a progression of threes that leads inevitably to a revelation of just how bad things can be when you trust the wrong person. This idea is reinforced by, and explains the necessity of, the wolf's earlier politeness: Predators are only nice when they want something from you.

The key here is that step four dramatizes a certain type of experience we might call the death of innocence. Its tension is not understood by most children, but adults unconsciously empathize with Red's plight. We've all been there. And because we've all been there, we find in the story something important and true and meaningful. Something worth passing on. When we had our run-in with the wolf, there was nothing we could do about it either. It took a woodcutter breaking into our life to pry us from the jaws of destruction.

Drawing the wrong conclusion

It must be said that not every story is honest. Any language can be used to lie, and the language of Story is no different. Some of our most powerful stories have at their heart either comforting half-truths or outright deception. Fortunately, dishonest stories have distinguishing characteristics: they make explicit what ought to be implied; they are internally inconsistent; they

violate the language of Story by pairing incompatible ideals.

These traits of dishonest stories will become clearer as we unpack the five core elements of Story in chapters two through six, but here an example from *Grimm's Fairy Tales* will reveal how the language of Story can be twisted. In this case, we will turn to *Hansel and Gretel* for its dark but highly memorable outline.

1. Trails of pebbles and breadcrumbs.
2. The old woman and her gingerbread house.
3. Hansel in a cage.
4. Gretel shoves the old woman into the oven.
5. Nature leads them home.

Notice that this story resolves when Gretel preemptively shoves the old woman (often portrayed as a witch) into an oven and frees Hansel. Here the consequences of that resolution reveal a theme that is both attractive and misleading. Having become hopelessly lost, the two children shouldn't be permitted, in storytelling terms, to simply run home. (Otherwise, why were they lost in the first place?) Nor are they rescued by some *deus ex machina* mechanism such as the arrival of a friendly woodcutter. Instead, they are saved by their own virtue. At the end of *Hansel and Gretel*, they find themselves separated from the way home by a lake or a river. A duck responds to their request for safe passage by ferrying them across, presumably because nature recognizes their innocence. Still children, their affinity with creation is untrammeled. The theme is thus something like: Self-defense does not destroy one's innocence. Or perhaps, Violence is compatible with virtue.

Again, these are approximations. The point is that however we state the class of experience explored in the resolution of this story, we arrive at a contradiction. It doesn't matter whether we call it "self-defense and innocence" or "violence and virtue," the result is the same.

We are being told a pleasant and attractive lie. That self-defense may at times be necessary and justifiable is not in question. But does such action really leave a person in a state of innocence? Hansel is caged, and Gretel preemptively shoves an old woman into an oven. Would children put in this predicament come away morally and psychologically unscathed?

This is not a critique of the violence in fairy tales, which is simply a matter of Story in its purest form being honest about the realities of life. But the idea that our violence, when undertaken for the right cause, does not touch one's soul is dangerous.

Some have pointed out that *Hansel and Gretel* is a terrible foreshadowing of the holocaust. "That the witch is often represented as a figure with stereotypical Jewish traits," Maria Tatar writes, "makes this [oven] scene all the more ominous."²¹ Though I wouldn't express my objection to the story based on such hindsight, I do think the lie at its heart is closely tied to those that fueled the Nazi death camps.

At any rate, stories carry enormous power to shape human development and influence culture. They exist to preserve and communicate meaning—specifically the meaning of life. They utilize basic elements which nearly everyone recognizes (characterization, plot, context, theme, and voice), even as they depend upon, and promote, shared moral values within a community.

This is why the church ought to be story specialists. Not only do we have the best story, we have the best reasons for telling it.

The story of that One is the story of us all. The story of the Incarnate One is the story of us, incarnations all. The story of the Son of God is the story of every son and daughter of God.²²

Entering the Great Pyramid

If something as simple as a fairy tale can influence the course of history, why do we doubt the power of biblical narratives? As I've already suggested, I believe the main reason is that we are no longer fluent in the language of Story. We do not understand the deep significance of its universality or of its constituent parts. My prayer is that this book will help correct this shortcoming.

Understanding how story works will not only bring new light to the Bible, it will illuminate every area of life. We are wired for Story because it is how we recognize the divine patterns around us. God is telling His story not just through the scriptures, but through all of creation. Through life—the good, the bad, and the perplexing. Indeed, He is telling it through us.

Story isn't imposed on our lives; it invites us into its life. As we enter and imaginatively participate, we find ourselves in a more spacious, freer, and more coherent world. We didn't know all this was going on! We had never noticed all this significance! If true—and the Bible is nothing if not true—story brings us into more reality, not less, expands horizons, sharpens both sight and insight. Story is the primary means we have for learning what the world is, and what it means to be a human being in it.²³

But as James Bryan Smith points out in *The Magnificent Story*, there is yet another reason the church must restore our storied past and learn to present the gospel story as a story for the present. It is not just Story in general that we were designed to enter, but one particular story:

We were made not just to enjoy stories but to enter them. We long to take our lives, our stories, and merge them with another story. This is truly what we long for. But we desire more than a children's bedtime story. We were made for something much bigger.²⁴

We were made to live inside the grand story pattern revealed in the entire arc of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. "You can't escape living in and through a story," Leonard Sweet

writes. “All of us are living a story. The question is what story and whose story are you living? Madison Avenue? Wall Street? Hollywood? Or Bethlehem?”²⁵

We were made to enter the story of Christ, the one true story, and so follow in His footsteps: from desert to valley to mountain; from garden to cross to resurrection; from life to death and back again to life.

His story—the story of Jesus—is the only story worth living. It is the great pyramid of our faith.

2

Kill the Wabbit!

CHARACTERIZATION

The first and most important element of any story is the central character, called the *protagonist*, or more colloquially, the *hero*. What makes this central figure important is her role as the moral center of the tale. She is uniquely positioned to embody the audience's projection of the self. What she wants, we want. What she fears, we fear. As she succeeds or fails, so do we.

Because fictional characters are not real people, but only representations, the language of Story draws protagonists on two co-existing planes—two accessible selves. One is the character's *internal* identity; the other is their *external* identity. Not every story explores these selves equally, but the default standard for a fictional protagonist—the universal template, if you will—is based on the conjunction of the inner and outer. Personality is the ultimate expression of personhood, and the simplest way to express the complexity of a human being is in this place of conjoined selves.

In life we experience our own inner and outer selves almost constantly. But we only ever experience the external selves of others. The inner life of someone else can only be known vicariously and imperfectly through something like a novel or memoir. But the external life of strangers is always present: we cheer for friends and family as they navigate life; we embrace the ups and downs of colleagues and peers as they celebrate or grieve; we follow the public lives of politicians and actors and despots via the nightly news.

The protagonist is therefore a mechanism for experiencing C. S. Lewis's "classes of experience" that we could not otherwise have. When the hero embarks on some adventure of discovery or revenge or restoration, we easily recognize that external struggle as a natural part of life. And when the hero is forced by story events to confront some internal flaw, we recognize that battle of repentance—the inner conflict of *who we will be*—as universal. Combined, these inner and outer struggles form the core of someone we can identify with.

This is how the protagonist becomes the central viewpoint through which story events are interpreted. It is why, for any story to resolve, the hero must overcome an outer force of opposition and an inner force of conflicting desires.

The Inner Self

The reason the protagonist is almost always flawed is that a moral flaw gives the character room to grow—and the story a way to resolve. Without a flaw, or at least a temptation, the character can't change. And if the character has no room to change and grow, the story's middle section won't produce a feeling of increasing tension. It will be a boring pause.

This doesn't mean the protagonist's flaw must be tragic, or even large. Minor flaws can be effective in stories because, as in life, they often have big consequences. Little lies can produce huge problems, creating a ripple effect that moves outward from one person to their family, their friends, and their community.

The job of the storyteller is therefore to extrapolate the effects of such flaws even when they're minor. Great storytellers show us how the tiniest of sins can have devastating effects on others. "Let our artists rather be those," Plato wrote, "who are gifted to discern the true nature of the beautiful and graceful."²⁶

It's a Wonderful Life, the classic Christmas movie starring Jimmy Stewart, is an iconic example of this. The protagonist, George Bailey, doesn't start out as a bad person. He starts out as a good person, a man who is self-sacrificing and kind and humble and courageous. But George believes a lie. And the lie he believes is something lots of people agree with, even if we don't admit it out loud. It's one of those things we believe privately but never verbalize because to speak it aloud would sound ugly and hedonistic.

George Bailey believes that the best possible life is the sort spent in travel and completing great projects. He believes in making his mark on the world by building bridges and seeing the wonders of history and perhaps winning a medal of honor fighting Nazis. He thinks that big men do big things.

The movie is a thoughtful examination of why that idea is wrong. It shows George, and therefore the audience, that the ordinary life he has lived is actually the remarkable one. No, he didn't go to war. He didn't even go to college. All he did was help common people in the miserable backwater town of Bedford Falls.

Along the way, however, the story (as all great stories do) exerts pressure on the hero to believe its core lie. When George pushes towards greatness, the story pushes back. At a crucial point, George says, "I suppose everyone would be better off if I'd never been born," and Clarence the angel says, "All right, you've got your wish." The rest of the film is a slow unpacking of the ripple effect of that little lie.

What makes this story work is that we don't expect the lie to extend as far as it does. The magnitude of the lie is shocking. And the reason it's shocking is that we believe the lie too.

It's not until the movie resolves and George says, "Take me back, Clarence. I want to live again" that he is made whole. In renouncing the lie, George Bailey becomes more than a good

man; he becomes a great man. And it happens because of the pressure generated during the middle section of the story, which is designed to expose the lie for what it is. George Bailey's growth—and the subsequent revelation of the lie shared by protagonist and audience—wouldn't be possible if George didn't start out believing something seemingly innocuous.

The principle of internal characterization, then, is that a protagonist's private/inner self is revealed through growth demonstrated by the correction of a flaw.

For a story to end well, the hero must fix his inner brokenness through repentance.

The Outer Self

It's not just the inner life of the main character that demonstrates growth. The protagonist's outer self also matters. This part of his or her identity will, in story terms, be defined by the problem/solution pattern sometimes called the Story Goal. Frodo Baggins, for instance, wants to destroy the One Ring. Luke Skywalker wants to blow up the Death Star. Dorothy wants to find her way back home to Kansas from Oz.

Each of these characters is driven by a desire to achieve something outside of themselves. They seek to change some aspect of their world—or, in Dorothy's case, to change worlds altogether.

Such a goal is typically described in terms of plot, but it's important to understand how a Story Goal will shape our perception of the main character. A Story Goal that means nothing to the protagonist won't resonate with the audience.

Truly immersive narratives connect us so deeply to the protagonist's outer motivation that we tend to see every event, character, setback, and significant line of dialogue through the lens of its impact on the attainability of the Story Goal. The reason we root for Ferris Bueller and

against Principle Rooney isn't that we think educators should mind their own business; it's that we're so aligned with Ferris's desire to escape the tedium of the classroom that *anything* standing in his way will be seen as a negative force of opposition. When Ferris Beuller is our moral compass, the weasel-faced Rooney, for better or worse, can only be interpreted as a villain.

But even as story obstacles are inevitably seen through the lens of the Story Goal, so too is the protagonist's outer self defined by the obstacles he or she overcomes. Hercules would not be a true hero had his labors included, say, taking out the trash and washing the dishes. Frodo's journey would not be interesting or enlightening if he'd caught a ride to Mordor on the back of a giant eagle. And Dorothy needed to journey through Oz in order to appreciate the words of the Wizard at the end.

All this resistance to the protagonist achieving the Story Goal creates a certain amount of physical and emotional torment. Sure, the heroine may get what she wants in the end. But along the way it's going to hurt. A *lot*. One way or another, Story demands that the protagonist suffers. Why? Because suffering is the only currency by which the value of the Story Goal can be established.

In 1999, comedian Billy Crystal paid \$239,000 for one of Mickey Mantel's baseball gloves.²⁷ I recall learning about it from a nightly news program, after which I muttered something like, "No glove is worth that much money!" I was wrong, of course. What made the glove so valuable is a principle of economics that's true of Ebay and of insurance law and of all humanity: something is worth the highest price anyone is willing to pay for it. The consequences of this principle are not just narratively essential; they're theologically profound in a way that creates a cascading domino effect of ultimate meaning.

In stories, the only currency of any value is the emotional investment of the audience.

This means that in order to create buy-in, a storyteller *must arrange for the protagonist to suffer*.

We've all read stories that ended too easily; what causes such stories to fail is a lack of value created through investment. Unless the main character suffers in some way, we have no idea what the Story Goal is worth. But when Luke Skywalker loses his mentor, Obiwan Kenobi, in the process of stealing the Death Star's blueprints, we feel the importance of his quest. When Gandalf goes over the edge of Khazad-dûm, we feel the importance of Frodo's quest. And when Christ takes up his cross and extends forgiveness to the soldiers who were hammering in the nails, we feel the importance of his quest—and the value of the Story Goal is cemented in our hearts.

How much were we worth to a loving God? The answer lies in the price he was willing to pay.

There is more to this idea—there are many other dominoes—but these can only be fully understood in light of the other story elements.

For now it is sufficient to say that Story's second principle of characterization is that a protagonist's outer self must be affirmed through the overcoming of a strong force of external opposition.

For a story to end well, the hero must pay a significant price.

The Moral Compass

Throughout history, stories have focused on the fact that the hero is flawed. This seems to be a universal observation across cultures and throughout recorded history. Gilgamesh is flawed. King David is flawed. Beowulf is flawed. This makes sense, because after you've lived a while

you realize that everyone really *is* flawed.

When it comes to stories, however, there are a few exceptions. But these exceptions exist to prove the rule. Heroes like Superman—or the clever “best of us” hero who defeats the Villain through some admirable ideal—don’t tell us that we’re all superheroes or role models. They tell us that we *should* be. They’re like recruiting posters. They work by assuming that we in the audience are flawed in a way the hero is not. The hero is a stand-in for the ideal we should all be trying to achieve.

This returns us to an idea brought up in chapter one, the concept of a moral compass.

It’s important to understand that the flaw in the protagonist couldn’t exist—and wouldn’t work in the story to produce room for growth—if the audience didn’t recognize the flaw as a real defect.

The reason we feel George Bailey’s despair and repentance so strongly at the end of *It’s a Wonderful Life* is that we’ve believed the same lie. And when it’s proved to *be* a lie, we undergo an internal emotional shift just as George Bailey does. That couldn’t happen if we didn’t recognize the truth of the movie. It’s a truth—like all effective story themes—that appeals to something outside of our material, pragmatic impulses.

It seems the language of Story can’t work without an objective moral standard for human behavior—a moral compass that is based on something other than personal preference. Story requires a physical human component and a spiritual human component, and it requires that these work together.

Whatever you call it—conscience, instinct, the soul—we can’t tell a story without it. Without a ghost in the machine, Story dies.

This may be one reason Jesus relied so heavily on parables and metaphors to

communicate his theology; story is a tailored made for such a conjunction of the material and the non-materials.

“Jesus was a *metaphorical* theologian. That is, his primary method of creating meaning was through metaphor, simile, parable and dramatic action rather than through logic and reasoning. He created meaning like a dramatist and a poet rather than a philosopher.”²⁸

This doesn’t mean Story is inherently religious. It does imply that we intuitively perceive the material world as linked to something intangible. Stories assume a yardstick against which the hero and the audience can be measured. Because a story isn’t just about the protagonist—it’s also about the audience. But most of all, it’s about the yardstick; the hero’s flaw can only exist if moral absolutes are real.

Perhaps this is why the inner self is so often used to apply pressure on the character’s outer self. The flaw becomes another obstacle blocking the hero’s path to the Story Goal. Frodo is not just opposed by orcs, goblins, ring wraiths, and the betrayal of his friends; he’s also being twisted by a growing love for the ring he plans to destroy. Near the end, the flaw that was barely noticeable at the beginning of the story has become monstrous in its power.

How any protagonist deals with the pressure created by such internal dissonance will determine whether he overcomes the flaw or is destroyed by it; it will also determine whether the Story Goal is attained.

This is how the hero becomes a bridge between the yardstick and the audience.

The yardstick of course is simply a set of clear, pre-determined standards that exist apart from the story’s characters, the audience, and even the storyteller. Just as we can’t change how long a yard is, neither can we change the moral absolutes that undergird story structure.

I’m not arguing here that morality is a set of knowable absolutes which exist outside of human preference, and therefore all human behavior can be measured against them. I am merely

pointing out that *this is what Story is saying*. Story, as a recurring pattern, assumes these moral absolutes really exist.

“Literature embodies virtue, first, by offering images of virtue in action and, second, by offering the reader vicarious practice in exercising virtue, which is not the same as actual practice, of course, but is nonetheless a practice by which habits of mind, ways of thinking, accrue.”²⁹

That Story does not try to go farther is significant. Allen Bailey comments on a principle he describes as “indirect directness”:

“The *directness* with which narrative approaches us is matched, therefore, by the *indirectness* with which it approaches God. In consequence, stories both acknowledge that God is beyond all description and comprehension, and yet demonstrate that God *can* be known and understood.”³⁰

Substitute the word *morality* for *God* and the same principle holds. Stories acknowledge moral absolutes *indirectly* by dealing with human experience *directly*. Or, as Philip and Carol Zaleski put it, “art clothes sacred truth in concrete form, escorting us through color, texture, shape, sound, movement, narrative, and verse into the felt presence of the divine.”³¹

We may not like the idea of a perfect moral yardstick. We may not agree that such a thing is real. It hardly matters. Story never builds anything substantial without a tape measure.

This leads to a more startling conclusion: you probably *do* agree with the idea of moral absolutes. If you didn’t, you’d never be able to enjoy a story.

When Ebenezer Scrooge is confronted by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future, you wouldn’t be moved by his repentance. You’d think, “Why does it matter if the old ladies steal his silk shirt after he’s dead? Why does it matter if Tiny Tim dies and Scrooge’s nephew mocks him at the Christmas party? None of those things is wrong because good and evil are both just illusions.” Nobody actually thinks this when engaged in a story. They rarely think it

in real life except when they're planning something they know to be wrong.

In the language of Story, moral absolutes are called Ideals. Ideals, according to my dictionary, are “standards of perfection.” They are principles that exist at the abstract extremes, and as such they are understood by nearly everyone to be both tangible and intangible. In Story, an ideal is anything like Love, Forgiveness, Revenge, Honesty, or Cruelty. Not necessarily *good* things, but things which are absolute.

No story can work if the storyteller can't point to something like forgiveness and make it the hinge point of the hero's moral journey. Without ideals, without a set of clear moral parameters, there's no basis for a character arc; without a clear character arc, there's no change; and without change there's no story.

But perhaps “yardstick” is too simple. Instead, imagine a giant nautical compass, something large enough to be segmented into hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of radial degrees. Remember that a true compass can point in all directions but is only trustworthy because there is such a thing as true north. In this case, true north would represent the idea that some ideals are positive and others negative. Forgiveness is positive, and revenge, its diametric opposite, is negative.

This doesn't mean we all agree about what's moral and what's immoral. Nor does it mean storytellers can't try to influence an audience's perception of the moral compass. On the contrary, Hollywood often tries to undermine traditional values in the name of artistic expression.

Notice that in the previous sentence, two sets of moral ideals are pitted against each other: *traditional values* vs. *artistic expression*. Or perhaps *tradition* vs. *art*, or even *values* vs. *expression*. How you see that argument may be a function of your political beliefs or your

upbringing or even your selfish preferences. But however you see it, you're siding with one of the two absolutes.

When storytellers try to shape an audience's moral compass, they never abandon the security of moral absolutes. They can't abandon them, because if they did, their stories would cease to function as stories.

The movie *The Cider House Rules* is a great illustration of this. It's a brilliantly written, well-acted, well-constructed, gorgeously filmed story that tries to convince the audience in a very subtle way that Satanism is true.

I'm not using the word *Satanism* for its shock value, like the church lady in the old Saturday Night Live skits. I'm simply pointing out that the theme of *Cider House Rules* is that all moral absolutes are illusions, and the source of our moral judgement resides exclusively in ourselves. That is the essence of modern Satanism, and its connection to the film is not accidental. The filmmakers were clearly trying to make a case for it. For proof I would point to the imagery they created for the story's resolution: apples being pulped *en masse*.

Novelist John Gardner eviscerated such storytelling—and the critics who shower it with acclaim—back in 1978 in *On Moral Fiction*.

"Most art these days is either trivial or false. ... For the most part our artists do not struggle—as artists have traditionally struggled—toward a vision of how things ought to be or what has gone wrong; they do not provide us with the flicker of lightning that shows us where we are. Either they pointlessly waste our time, saying and doing nothing, or they celebrate ugliness and futility, scoffing at good. ... We are rich in schools which speak of how art "works" and avoid the whole subject of what it ought to do."³²

What makes *Cider House* worthy of mention here is its revelation of the moral compass as inescapable: the story uses a moral absolute (rape is always wrong) in order to prove to the

audience that moral absolutes don't exist. Apparently even moral relativists are driven by moral absolutes.

On a deeper level, this is the language of Story expressing its true nature. Not that moral relativism is wrong (it is), but that Story rejects the premise of moral relativism in the same way physics rejects the model of a steady-state universe. If I try to frame a story around the premise that moral absolutes don't exist, I will only end up with something unrecognizable as a story. And what I'll really be saying is that my own moral compass is broken.

Ironically, this last point is the essence of what Story is saying through the conjoined selves of characterization. My moral compass *is* broken. And the only way to put it right is to acknowledge that I'm wrong, and that the compass, whatever that ultimately represents, is right.

A Perfect Compass

For Story to work as it does, this compass of charged ideals must have three traits, each of which is recognizable in story structure. The moral compass must be:

1. Perfect
2. Comprehensible
3. Uncompromising

The compass is **perfect** in that it exists across every spectrum of human experience and morality; it contains every conceivable ideal, from honesty to courage to desire. It is perfect in the sense that a yardstick can be precise down to the smallest of measurements. Furthermore, it accounts for a spectrum of positive and negative values that are themselves perfect and pure, though not always good. In other words, it sets up Love as a perfect ideal, and also Hatred. It marks out Joy, and also Sorrow. Polar opposites are as necessary to the moral compass of Story as they are to Earth's magnetic field.

Notice that the moral compass as I'm describing it accounts for even the tiniest of moral flaws. It's also pre-loaded with ideals that result from our interaction with the compass itself. It doesn't just point to the ideals we might expect: *love* and *honesty* and *courage*. It also seems to account for the possibility of failure and reversal. That is, some of the points on the compass are marked *forgiveness* and *repentance* and *mercy*. These are ideals that indicate change and growth, without which a story would be impossible. In other words, Story's ideals allow for people to become better moral agents.

And that means the moral compass must **comprehensible**. If it weren't, we'd have no knowledge of our own moral failures, and there would be no reference point, no sense in referring to a compass at all. Our stories would not be moral, nor would they call us to change and grow.

And that in turn indicates a third thing, that the moral compass is **uncompromising**. Which is to say that it is always the human who needs to change, not the compass. *Cider House Rules* notwithstanding, states of perfection do not evolve. Ideals are useful because they are perfect, just as a yardstick is useful because it is always exactly the same length.

To be clear, the moral compass embedded in the language of Story may be an artifact of something else, some other human attribute that falls outside the scope of this book. The point is not that moral absolutes are absolute proof of God, but that without a moral compass the language of Story is meaningless. Every character arc from Beowulf to the latest Disney princess points to the existence of real moral absolutes that do not and cannot change without disappearing altogether.

Like it or not, Story is telling us that we're aware of something outside ourselves to which we are all accountable, and to which our own behavior is not measuring up.

Kill the Wabbit

I grew up watching Warner Brothers cartoons. I still think Bugs Bunny and Road Runner are masterpieces of comedic storytelling.

One of my favorites is their spoof of Wagnerian Opera in which Elmer Fudd falls in love with Bugs Bunny—and then falls out of love and is driven to “kill the wabbit!”

“Kill the wabbit” is about as clear a character motivation as you can have. Clarity is one reason the Warner Brothers cartoons are so brilliant. Every cartoon tells a story so simple anyone of any age can both understand and enjoy it. Such dramatic clarity isn’t easy.

In *What’s Opera Doc*, Elmer Fudd thinks he has fallen in love with Brunhilda. But Brunhilda is really Bugs Bunny in disguise. When Bugs’s helmet falls off and his long bunny ears pop out, Elmer Fudd is enraged. We know from past cartoons that Elmer Fudd’s one driving desire in life is to hunt wabbits.

As simple as this is, it’s pure storytelling. The hero has a desire—a Story Goal—that produces conflict when mixed with his moral flaw.

Elmer Fudd wants Brunhilda.

His moral flaw is that he hates bunnies.

The story will end—as good stories always do—when these two things, the internal and the external, connect in a single moment of resolution. Either the hero attains the Story Goal or he doesn’t. If he *does*, it’s because he overcame that moral flaw. If he *doesn’t*, it’s because the flaw got the better of him.

This is what makes the end of a good story not just surprising, but revelatory. When the end of a story feels satisfying, it’s because the conflict is resolved in a logical but unpredictable

way that reveals something about the hero's relationship to the moral compass. An audience's sense of revelation is produced by the realization that the story's events have demonstrated a truth we do not yet understand, but which may become evident upon further reflection.

If this sounds difficult to achieve, try watching *What's Opera Doc?* At the end of the cartoon, after Fudd has blasted poor Bugs with lightning from his spear and magic helmet, he sees Bugs Bunny's dead body and laments what he was driven to do. Elmer Fudd repents at the end because his moral flaw has destroyed the Story Goal. He has killed Brunhilda. Poor widdle bunny. Poor widdle wabbit.

The Promise of Happiness

The language of Story is about compressed meaning. Its patterns always try to point outside the story to the reality of the audience.

Here this principle becomes interesting because the protagonist's Story Goal is really an implied promise to the audience that if two conditions are met, the story will resolve in a satisfying way. It will end happily (for us, anyway) as long as hero's conjoined selves succeed. The hero must overcome his moral flaw *and* defeat the external forces of opposition. Frodo must resist the temptation of the One Ring *and* toss it into a volcano.

Now what makes this story pattern interesting to me is not that it's so obviously true in real life, but that it obviously *isn't*.

So much of human experience contradicts the promise of life and hope we see concentrated around the Story Goal. Plenty of people have gone to their deaths hoping for a happy ending. And even in less extreme cases, we see the opposite of the happy reward all the time. You do the right thing, but your boss fires you anyway. You tell the truth, and no one

believes you. You do all the work, and someone else gets the credit. That is the stuff of life. (Of course, it's also the stuff of stories, but we'll get to that point later.) It's also why people say that, "things don't always work out in real life the way they do in stories."

The really odd thing about this contradiction is that even though situations in life don't always end happily, we still crave Story Goals that reward repentance and perseverance with what Hollywood used to call, "the girl, the gold watch, and everything."

Somehow, in spite of our own personal experiences, we see this reward pattern as *right*. It's what we want in a story.

The simple explanation for this is that people want happy endings in their stories because they aren't getting them anywhere else. Which may be true. But I think this explanation is too simple. It doesn't account for all the facts.

The most important fact it leaves out is that stories with unhappy endings are almost never successful commercially. Moreover, the ones that *are* successful commercially always have something in common: they point to the idea that the pattern itself is actually true. Not escapist. But prescriptive.

Put another way, stories with unhappy endings, when commercially successful, are almost always saying that the reason the hero didn't get the Story Goal is *because* he didn't meet the conditions. Either he didn't defeat the external forces of opposition, or he didn't overcome his internal moral flaw. Either the dragon killed him, or he let his hatred of wabbits destroy his love of Brunhilda.

This is why both types of stories—those with a happy ending, and the far less common ones with an unhappy ending—always hold out as *right* a pattern of rewards based on overcoming internal and external conflict. Put simply, the language of Story is telling us that:

A story will end happily if the hero:

- 1) overcomes temptation, and
- 2) defeats the bad guy.

Even when we don't like a particular story, or that simplistic pattern, we can't help but react emotionally to its formula. We seem to unconsciously recognize and desire this kind of prescription for life—even though it doesn't seem to work.

And how weird is that? Are we all really using a flight simulator that's telling us to press the wrong buttons? Or is there another, more surprising, explanation?

What if the problem isn't with the flight simulator, but with the airplanes—and we've greatly misunderstood what our lives are about?

What if the moral compass is a real representation of a real protagonist, but we're all wrong about the story we're meant to be living?

What if I'm not the hero of my own life?

3

The Price Paid PLOT

If I'm not the hero of my own life, who is? And what does that imply about the story I'm living?

To answer these questions, it may be helpful to understand the universal arcs or plot-types employed by most stories throughout human history.

Storytellers and narrative theorists have many ways of defining and categorizing plots.

The simplest is represented in the twin masks of Greek theater; comedy and tragedy, which may be understood as symbols of the happy and the sad ending. If art reflects life, then this approach to plot makes sense because it fits our perception that fortune favors some and torments others. On the other hand, it doesn't say much about the nature of reality unless you accept the Greek mindset that fortune is a lunatic. Life is a comedy? Sure, and you're the ass everyone is laughing at. Life's a tragedy? That's because the gods don't play fair; whatever our bad deeds, their punishments don't fit our crimes.

More complicated plot theories include a vast range of ideas too numerous to be useful here. I have a shelf in my office dedicated to books on the subject, and though each is useful in its own way, virtually all of them focus on plot as a series of events. This is why one theorist can claim there are ten plots, another that there are twenty, a third, fifty, a fourth, 100, a fifth, 200, and a sixth that 1,000 plots are available to the perceptive storyteller.

Story nerds love this sort of thing, but what concerns us here is what these theories have in common: they all assume that plots are defined best by what happens. That is, the “Sleuth Who Solves a Crime Committed By Her Mentor” plot (which I just made up but has undoubtedly been done more than once), is obviously a short description of a specific story pattern. A crime is committed, a sleuth takes the case, and eventually our villain is revealed as a personal friend of the protagonist.

The problem with this sort of description is that it leaves out the most important aspect of any plot, which is the method of its resolution.

As a young man I had the good fortune to study creative writing with science fiction legend James Gunn, who sometimes referred to “the three plots.” He claimed there were three and only three plots that were the basis of every story:

1. Boy Meets Girl
2. The Man Who Learned Better, and
3. The Little Tailor.

It took me years to wrap my mind around the significance of this simple paradigm. Only when I realized that these plot types are defined by their resolution, not by any series of particular events within them, did I understand Gunn’s rationale.

A story is best understood by what type of Story Goal it is striving towards. This is why every successful novel and movie opens with clear implications about what sort of story the audience should expect. A horror movie will have a certain look from the opening frame, and that look will have little in common with a rom-com. A cozy mystery novel will not begin with the sort of opening used in a Terry Pratchett comedic fantasy. The audience needs to know what they are in for. Thus Hemingway opens *The Old Man and the Sea* with this remarkable sentence:

He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream

and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish.³³

In the very first sentence of the novel we are introduced to the central character (an old man), the Story Goal (to catch a fish), a reason to care (eighty-four days), and the genre (fishing adventure).

How will the story end? I won't spoil it for you, but it's safe to assume that it involves catching a fish. Otherwise, why not start the book on day eighty-seven, or whenever the old man's unlucky streak ends?

More to the point, which plot is Hemingway using?

It isn't *Boy Meets Girl*. Nor is this a *Man Who Learned Better* story. Therefore, if Gunn is right, this must be a variation of *The Little Tailor*. If you've never read that fairy tale, the important thing to understand is that the story involves a humble protagonist who overcomes a series of increasingly difficult obstacles in order to win the hand of a princess (his story goal). This story type is sometimes also called the *Mono-myth* or the *Heroic Quest*, and it has been used for stories as varied as *The Labors of Hercules*, *Star Wars*, and *The Lord of the Rings*.

Each of these three plot types works because of something that happens during its resolution. That is, each sort of resolution creates an emotional reaction, a feeling of satisfaction about the world being set right.

In a *Boy Meets Girl* story, this feeling of satisfaction is created by a shift in the relational status of the central character. Janet begins the story alone, but by the end has met her perfect relational match. The tension of her need, which drives the major plot twists and reversals, is resolved only when her longing for wholeness is met, when Janet changed states from alone to together. The Boy Meets Girl plot is about a character achieving a state of completion.

The Man Who Learned Better story focuses on the tension of an unresolved character flaw, sometimes portrayed as a lie the protagonist accepts as true. Ebenezer Scrooge, for

instance, has traded his love of humanity for the love of money. Dickens corrects this flaw by sending four spirits into Scrooge's life to show him why and how his choices are producing the destruction of his own happiness and purpose. What makes this plot type effective is the emotion produced by a protagonist's dramatic but relatable change of heart.

The Little Tailor/ Heroic Quest plot type, resolves when the protagonist finally achieves the Story Goal by overcoming a series of increasingly difficult obstacles. In his classic work on narrative mythology, Joseph Campbell describes the pattern quite simply: "... he must survive a succession of trials. This is a favorite phase of the myth-adventure. It has produced a world literature of miraculous tests and ordeals."³⁴

Along the way, he or she typically lets go of a comfortable but false identity and assumes a truer but more difficult one. This act of surrender is usually linked to an act of self-sacrifice that results in the survival of their community. Luke Skywalker, for example, must surrender his dream of becoming a pilot in order to take the harder but more honest path of the Jedi. It is his final act of surrender—"Use the Force, Luke!"—that enables him to destroy the Death Star and save untold billions.

What makes these three plots effective as story patterns is the emotion they create in their resolution through shared "classes of experience."³⁵ Life, in other words, is a story. And the story of every person's life tends to be most dramatic, most emotive, in those experiences which look like the end of a *Boy Meets Girl*, *Heroic Quest*, or *Man Who Learned Better* story. Furthermore, each of these dramatic arcs is experienced by nearly everyone by the time they reach adulthood.

Most of us can relate to the *Boy Meets Girl* plot type, for instance, because we too have lived through the dramatic tension of unrequited love, of painful miscommunication, of relational wrong turns, and of the heartbreak of rejection. "She loves me, she loves me not," is relatable

and agonizing, which is what makes it a well-spring of dramatic power.

Similarly, *The Man Who Learned Better* plot type draws from our shared sense of moral failure—and the awful recognition of that moral failure when we are finally confronted with its consequences. This sort of story has broad dramatic power because nearly everyone has a skeleton or two in their closet. So stories that center on an act of repentance typically work by showing us the nature of our own failure as the result of accepting a seemingly innocuous lie: *No one will notice. I deserve this more than they do. It's all in good fun, right?* In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey believes a lie about what makes life wonderful. Only at the end of the film does he recognize that the quiet life he has despised is really the most wonderful sort possible.

It doesn't take a lifetime of bad choices to store up significant failures. Most of us can recall at least one humiliating act of selfishness from our teen years. If only we could have learned better before storing up those bitter memories! Which is why *The Man Who Learned Better* plot type resonates across history. We all, like George, have gone astray, each of us turning to our own cringey way.

Finally, the *Heroic Quest* may be the most unexpectedly resonant plot type when viewed critically. Because few of us live the sorts of adventures found in mono-myth stories—let alone the fantastical extremes of Jedi training or epic battles with a dragon—it is easy to dismiss such stories as wholly unreal. But this is a mistake. It is not the fantastic or extreme elements that produce a sense of satisfaction at the end of a Heroic Quest tale. It is a sense of shared experience. The wonder of a science fiction or fantasy movie is what pulls the audience in, not what sparks a feeling of satisfaction at the end. Heroic Quest stories resolve through achievement in the face of great danger and uncertainty—an achievement that comes at the cost of enormous pain and self-sacrifice. This is why anyone can relate to this plot type. It is dramatically relevant

because it mirrors the universal human quest for identity as we journey from child to adult.

At some point every child understands that he or she is entering the community of grownups, and so wonders what his or her place will be within it. Before long we must all face the question, *Who will I be then?* And many cultures have developed rites of passage to help answer that question, to signal to young adults that they are now part of the larger circle, that in spite of their lack of life experiences they are now seen as independent agents who will be accepted or rejected based on their own decisions and actions.

Stories, particularly those patterned after *The Heroic Quest*, are humanity's attempt to meaningfully answer our search for identity. The mono-myth story pattern suggests that in becoming a new and truer version of yourself, a contributing adult, you must let go of the comfortable, selfish delusions of childhood. The heroic figure, the one admired and esteemed by the community, is the one who sacrifices for the good of others, accepting the challenges and hardships of life even to the point of death. This, at any rate, is the story we internalize. And because we internalize it, we are easily drawn to the emotions of its resolution. When Frodo stands with the ring at Mount Doom, or when Luke Skywalker fires the last shot at the Death Star, or when Indiana Jones closes his eyes at the opening of the Ark of the Covenant, we recognize the moment as universal and human. It is a relatable transformation into a new and greater identity, but one that comes with intense suffering.

In short, each of these three plot types is a dramatization of universal human experience. We long for relationship. We find peace through repentance/moral growth. We discover meaning through individual sacrifice for a larger community or public good.

The Moral Nature of Plot

It follows that if these plots are defined by the emotional resonance of their resolutions, then what precedes them in a story must be a logical set-up for a climactic moment of change. In a *Boy Meets Girl* story the central question must be something like, *Will Dillon and Janette fall in love?*, and the plot will go through a series of setbacks and difficulties designed to keep them apart and out of love. And because the central question in a *Man Who Learned Better* story will always be some variation of, *Will Scrooge change his ways?*, the events that set-up such repentance will exist to show us how and why the protagonist is flawed. And in a *Heroic Quest*, in order to provoke the audience to ask itself, *Does the Death Star eventually go kaboom?*, the beginning and middle sections will exist primarily to create doubt about the possibility of a happy ending.

Notice that each of these questions points to a single Story Goal. That is, audiences understand a story primarily in terms of the goal the protagonist is striving towards. If the protagonist wants to blow up the Death Star more than he wants to win someone's affection, we're watching *Star Wars*, not *Sleepless in Seattle*.

This understanding of story through reverse engineering can be illuminating. For one thing, it reveals the chronological nature of storytelling. Less obviously, it shows us that the resolution of any story derives from a logical, true-to-life re-alignment of what *is* with what *should be*. That is, a story resolves because something is made right that was formerly wrong.

Plots, in other words, are best understood in terms of their source of conflict, which derives from the protagonist's story goal. Love, repentance, and selfless achievement are thus the engines that drive every plot.

However, it is important to remember that before a story can work structurally, it must

work emotively. Stories, as I said in chapter one, always have as their first and primary goal to entertain and delight.

Every story aims first to make us feel something. Good stories create precise emotions at precise moments. The audience laughs at the jokes and cries at the sad parts. Bad stories create the wrong emotions at the wrong times. Readers laugh when you want them to cry, or roll their eyes when they're meant to feel sad.

Stories that create no emotion are often unrecognizable as stories.

Understanding the role of emotion in Story is key to recognizing its power. The better a story is crafted—the more immersive and emotive it is—the more an audience will enjoy it. We love stories that move us.

But we don't just love them. We surrender to them. We're vulnerable to them. We have no immunity against a powerful story, even when that story is communicating something that contradicts our worldview.

This has been demonstrated by research. In a paper published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers Melanie Green and Timothy Brock presented research indicating that the more transported an audience is, the more they adapt their beliefs to match those unpinning the story.

The data provided initial evidence that transportation is associated with story-consistent beliefs. Highly transported participants showed beliefs more consonant with story conclusions as well as more positive evaluations of the story protagonists. Becoming involved in a narrative world seemed to have measurable consequences. Although these correlational analyses cannot establish causality, a likely possibility is that individuals altered their real-world beliefs in response to experiences in a story world.³⁶

Furthermore, their research also showed that it is not necessary that the beliefs being

adopted by the audience be overtly stated by the storyteller. Instead, “transportation is a mechanism whereby narratives may exert their power to change beliefs. The results were noteworthy in that the belief-change dimensions were not explicitly articulated in the story.”³⁷

A well-told story bypasses our intellectual firewalls and changes us through our emotions. Story is not a direct assault on our ability to reason and consider all sides. It’s not an invitation for the mind to participate in a fair debate. Story is a sneaky torpedo-shot aimed at the heart.

This fact is increasingly explained by advances in psychology and neuroscience:

Contrary to earlier cognitive science theories of emotion as a disrupting force, emotion is now understood to be a broad, organizing force in human functioning. It increasingly seems that emotion provides the broad context of meaning that organizes and influences all information processing.³⁸

Fantasy writer Diana Wynn Jones seems to have understood the power of emotion-based narratives when she compared stories to maps in describing their function in training children:

Most fairy stories are practically perfect examples of narratives that fit the pattern of the mind at work. They state a problem as a “what if” from the outset. “What if there were this wicked uncle? That evil stepmother who is a witch? This loathsome monster?” Stated in this way, the problem (parent? Bully?) is posed for the widest possible number of people, but posed in a way that enables the reader to walk all around it and see the rights and wrongs of it. This uncle, witch, or monster is a vile being behaving vilely. As these beings will inevitably match with an actual person: parent, sibling, schoolfellow, what a child gains thereby is a sort of blueprint of society. Reading the story, he or she is constructing a mental map—in bold colors or stark black-and-white—of right and wrong and life as it should be. Turning to the actual parent or schoolfellow, where right and wrong are apt to be very blurred, this child will now have the mental map for guidance.³⁹

Notice that the central issue for Jones is essentially moral in nature. In describing the

function of story she naturally, perhaps even unconsciously, reaches for classes of behavior that can only be understood in moral or ethical terms. The uncle is not primarily powerful but *wicked*. The stepmother is a *witch*. The monster is *loathsome*. All three are *vile*. Even the idea of “should be” implies a moral standard by which life itself must be measured. Indeed, the very point for Jones is that children are equipped to distinguish right from wrong, especially where these are “apt to be very blurred.”

Story, in other words, uses the most direct and immediate pathway to neural processing that any human has⁴⁰ in order to help us interpret the moral nature of the real world. Filmmaker Stanley D. Williams calls this central issue of storytelling “the Moral Premise” and defines it in a single sentence: “Vice leads to undesirable consequences; but Virtue leads to desirable consequences.”⁴¹

A microbiologist once asked me politely why I thought the stories-as-flight-simulators idea was too simple.

I replied that it was the right-and-wrong foundation of stories that best reveals their true function. “If the point is mere survival,” I asked her, “why are heroes so often required to sacrifice themselves?”

She had an excellent answer, and one I was expecting. “Maybe because the hero is sacrificing himself for someone else? For his family or tribe? In which case the Darwinian explanation holds, because what he is really protecting is his genetic blueprint.”

“Sure,” I said. “That would make sense if our story patterns consistently elevated the survival of family and tribe over personal survival. But that isn’t what we see. What we see in stories is the elevation of a moral standard above survival, above even the survival of one’s family and friends. No one celebrates the Nazis who defended the collapsing Third Reich in its

final days. We do celebrate Anne Frank's naive but beautiful optimism."

I would add here that no price is too high, no sacrifice too large, that the Language of Story would not demand its payment in the service of a moral absolute. Even reading 'Horatius at the Bridge'—the quintessential sacrifice-for-one's-tribe story—it is clear that Macaulay is celebrating not the salvation of Rome but the courage of its gatekeeper. That Horatius held off the invading Etruscans is part of the story's happy ending. But what makes it work as a story, what gives it depth of theme, is that he was willing to pay the ultimate price for a principle. His valor would have been no less praiseworthy had he succumbed to his wounds as the bridge collapsed.

And they made a molten image, and set it up on high,
 And there it stands unto this day to witness if I lie.
 It stands in the Comitium, plain for all folk to see;
 Horatius in his harness, halting upon one knee:
 And underneath is written, in letters all of gold,
 How valiantly he kept the bridge in the brave days of old.
 And still his name sounds stirring unto the men of Rome,
 As the trumpet-blast that calls to them to charge the Volscian home;
 And wives still pray to Juno for boys with hearts as bold
 As his who kept the bridge so well in the brave days of old.⁴²

But Story's commitment to a moral standard of perfection requires something besides a defining principle and an emotional reaction in the audience. In order to produce that reaction, the principle must be tested, the feelings triggered by something significant and meaningful. The guiding principle of a story won't make sense until its worth is established. Horatius certainly had the option to not be brave when the Etruscan army appeared on the horizon. But it was only an option because they did. Horatius could be neither coward nor hero in their absence. In their presence he could be either, and the choice was his.

Then out spoke brave Horatius, the Captain of the Gate:
 "To every man upon this earth, death cometh soon or late;
 And how can man die better than facing fearful odds,
 For the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his Gods..."⁴³

Here Horatius pins his valor to a principle, not a people. *We all die. Why not die well, for something eternal and absolute?*

Such choices are essential in stories because they reveal to us two things. First, they show us the true nature of a character. For it is the internal fortitude and adherence to moral standards that define for us the nature of someone's inner self. It is not the color of their eyes or their quirky habits or their vocational skills that inspire our loyalty. We are drawn to people we know deeply, even when we dislike their personalities or lifestyles or beliefs. We can love almost anyone who grants us access to their soul. For human beings, the way into another's core self—what we might think of as the pyramid's descending passage—is to agonize with them as they experience the torment of a dilemma, a terrible choice that must be made between two awful alternatives.

True Character is revealed in the choices a human being makes under pressure—the greater the pressure, the deeper the revelation, the truer the choice to the character's essential nature.⁴⁴

The second thing such choices reveal to us is the underlying principle embodied by the character. We don't just get to know Horatius by what matters to him most ("the ashes of his fathers, and the temples of his Gods"); we get to see the *value* of those things as principles or ideals. The agony of a story dilemma reveals to us the central importance of the moral compass.

The Structure of Conflict

Dilemmas serve another purpose, and that is to establish a pattern of internal conflict that drives the dramatic action of a scene. Though a comprehensive analysis of scenic structure is beyond the scope of this book, an elementary understanding of the role played by internal conflict may prove illuminating.

As screenwriting guru Robert McKee puts it, “Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict.”⁴⁵ All conflict can be reduced for the purposes of dramatic structure to that which derives from an *external* force of antagonism or that which comes from an *internal* force of divided needs or desires. Either something goes terribly wrong in a character’s life or that same character is forced to make a terrible choice between two negative alternatives. The former may, for the sake of simplicity, be referred to as a Disaster. The latter we have already termed a Dilemma.

These two basic sources of conflict are the engines of dramatic tension that move any scene forward. In a well-written story, every scene will be fueled either by something going terribly wrong or by a character discovering he or she must make a terrible choice.

Disaster and Dilemma are relative terms. In one story the disastrous moment of high tension may express itself in the opening of a letter. A Disaster scene therefore might be built around the moment our hero discovers that she is being sued, or that her husband has been killed at sea, or that someone is blackmailing her over a long-past sin she now regrets. In another story the disaster might appear to be much less sinister: a child fails a spelling test, for instance, or someone in the lunch room bullies her in front of her peers. Whatever the disaster, it will manifest as the point of highest tension in the scene, much like the breaking of a stick over one’s knee. First there is a bending, then increasing resistance, and finally a sudden *snap!* And its resulting finality. In a Disaster scene, something important *breaks*. Moreover, we in the audience understand the consequences of that breaking, which is why it *feels* like a disaster to us as we experience it vicariously through the story’s characters.

In a scene structured as a true Dilemma, the high point of breaking will be centered on a character’s *internal* conflict. Faced with two awful possibilities, he or she is forced to decide

between them as the audience, aware of the consequences of each possibility, watches transfixed. Will she watch her husband and son be taken away to a concentration camp, thus living with the uncertainty of their fate, or will she surrender herself and join them? This choice, taken from Roberto Benini's cinematic masterpiece, *Life is Beautiful*, is a beautiful illustration of the power of internal conflict. Not only are both possibilities terrible, but a decision is unavoidable. To not act, to not decide, is in fact a decision. Moreover, it is a fully understandable decision that invites the audience to wrestle with a moral question: *What would I do in her place?* Whatever she chooses, we cannot help but know her better as a result. We have been invited into her soul. And the doorway into that sort of knowing is a crisis of decision, a single moment of torment.

Notice that both Disasters and Dilemmas get their power from the resolution of breaking in a scene. The high point of tension and conflict is in fact a moment of suffering.

Jack-in-the-box

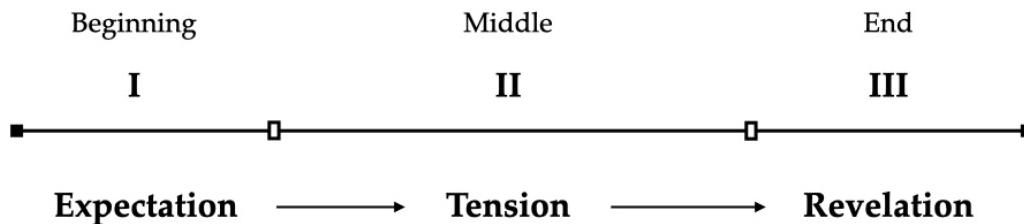
When I was a little boy I used to go over to the neighbor's house to play. He was my age and he had a tin jack-in-the-box that played *All Around the Mulberry Bush* when you turned the handle. And when you got to the part of the song that goes "Pop! Goes the weasel" the lid would open and a horrifying monkey on a spring would jump out.

I still hate those things to this day. But that didn't stop me from cranking the handle over and over again. Sure, you're a little scared. But you shove the monkey back in, start turning, and the song begins again. And as it does, you start to feel the tension. At least when you're four.

In a sense, all stories have a jack-in-the-box structure. Writing teachers like to say that stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Sometimes we use that fact as an introduction to three-act story structure, but it is really a matter of elementary story grammar. Stories tend to

have three chronological parts because the human emotions that characterize a great story are triune in experience.

The beginning of the story is a matter of cranking the handle. The middle is the tension between the expectation created by the start of the song and the thing we know is coming. And the end is the sudden appearance of a monkey-clown.



The opening **Expectation**, which is set up in the beginning of the story and can be as short as a single sentence or can take many pages in a novel. Usually the expectation of the opening ends no later than 25% of the way into a story. This is where the first act of a screenplay usually ends, at about 25 minutes into a film.

The middle section is where our expectations are opposed by some force of antagonism or conflict that is repeatedly expressed through disasters and dilemmas. That sort of opposition causes **Tension**, and heightens our emotional investment in the story. In the first part we were given something to want, but in this part what we want is refused, usually in a way that creates angst about a belief we hold to be true. Something like: *Love always prevails*, or *honesty is better than lying*, or even that *power corrupts*. Of course, that sort of belief can't be stated overtly or the story will not work as a story. But the underlying belief will still be there. And in the Tension section it will be challenged and made to look weak and foolish.

It is not the despair that we abstract to some universal value, but

the struggle. But however it may be achieved, in all great fiction, primary emotion ... must sooner or later lift off from the particular and be transformed to an expression of what is universally good in human life ... in other words, some statement on value. In good fiction, this statement is likely to be too subtle, too loaded with qualifications, to be expressed in any way but the story's way; it may be impossible, that is, to reduce to any rule of behavior or general thesis. We understand the value, understand it with great precision, but even the shrewdest literary critic may have trouble formulating it in words and thus telling us the story's "message."⁴⁶

The Tension section of the story is where doubt about something meaningful to the audience comes in. And it comes in because what we want, which itself represents something deeper and more significant, seems to be rebuffed by something more powerful but also less right.

As the story progresses that doubt will increase, which in turn will increase our sense of tension, until we arrive at the end of the story, which can be called the surprise or **Revelation** moment. "The Climax of the last act is your great imaginative leap. Without it, you have no story. Until you have it, your characters wait like suffering patients waiting for a cure."⁴⁷

This is the moment when the monkey bursts out of the box. What makes it work is that it is both predictable and unexpected. That is, we in the audience should have seen it coming but didn't. The tension has been getting stronger and stronger until there seems to be no way the good guy can win, no way the truth we believe can be validated. But suddenly the unexpected happens, and we see the whole story and the whole argument in a new light. It comes as a kind of revelation. Luke Skywalker uses the force to fire his last shot at the Death Star. Ebenezer Scrooge sees himself in the grave. The Martians in *The War of the Worlds* defeat mankind but haven't planned to defend themselves against Earth's bacteria.

Surprise. The thing we hold to be true really *is* true, but not the way we expected. That's a revelation, and something we feel we learned. But we didn't just learn it. We *earned* it.

Because we went through the Tension section and faced all of the reasons why what we want might not be true after all. We shared in the suffering of the hero. And that suffering has affected us just as it might had we experienced the action of the story first-hand.

For suffering to produce change, it must shake or shatter our beliefs, what we know to be true, either explicitly or implicitly.⁴⁸

This sort of resolution produces a feeling of catharsis, and our brains get really happy. If the story is done well and we are completely transported, we will have a rush of emotion that seems to validate the original belief in question.

When people's worldview beliefs are shaken up, the resulting meaning-making can allow people to rebuild their assumptions about themselves and the world, facilitating growth. In fact, several studies have reported that the greater the threat, the greater the reported growth.⁴⁹

Isn't that cool?

And all the while, we won't realize that the process of living vicariously through that story has actually changed us.

Its suffering and resolution have convinced us of something.

And we don't even know it.

The Price Paid

The meaning of a story is therefore directly connected to the nature of the suffering its characters endure.

This principle is essential to storytelling. It turns out that suffering is the only currency available to the storyteller by which he or she can purchase the emotional involvement of the audience. Suffering is how the Story Goal acquires its perceived value. A hero who is willing to

endure physical, mental, and emotional pain is signaling the value of the story goal.

Stories are logical. They may employ fairy godmothers or magical rings, but internally, they always obey their own rules. A story must make sense to create emotion and it must make sense to prove its theme.

This is why writers sometimes talk about a story being “tight” or “tightly written.” What they mean is that everything works together and nothing is out of place. There aren’t any unnecessary characters or scenes or bits of dialogue. Furthermore, good stories are strictly and understandable causal.

The logic of storytelling demands that every event be interpreted as functional and necessary. Stories must make sense. In order to make sense, a story’s audience must be able to follow its chain of events from beginning to end. So A causes B, which causes C, which causes D, etc.

Sometimes that causation is hidden for a while by the storyteller, but it’s never hidden for the whole story. The language of Story is about meaning, after all, and extra or random elements will not add to its meaning but detract from it.

Suffering therefore *always* has a point in a story. The author’s point might be that life sucks, or that bad things happen randomly in life. But if a storyteller is using suffering in a story to make this point, she is admitting that suffering inside her story isn’t random. It was included to serve her purpose as a storyteller.

More commonly, suffering as a story device is used to create tension in the audience by demonstrating the internal and external forces of opposition. In a story, suffering is caused by flaws and opposition. The hero’s car didn’t explode because it got hit by a random meteor; it exploded because his enemies hired a hit man to kill him.

Internally, suffering is what produces the pressure for a character to change. In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George Bailey would never have understood the lie he was believing if he hadn't suffered the consequences of having his small, unimportant life stripped away from him.

This isn't just true for the Hero of the tale. It's also true for the audience. The only way we'll accept the importance of the Story Goal is if we see someone paying a high price to achieve it. If you tell us the Death Star has to be blown up, and someone runs off and does it and comes back unharmed, we won't care. If you tell us the ring of power must be dropped into the fiery chasm of Mount Doom, and one of the giant eagles volunteers to fly it over and drop it in from a safe distance, we won't care.

This is why stories almost always involve some element of suffering, whether that's social embarrassment or personal rejection or physical pain. Usually it's an escalating series of sufferings, each one worse than the last.

So what can we learn from this that points to Story as something larger than a Darwinian survival strategy?

First, in the language of Story, suffering isn't permanent. It's something to be overcome. When the Story Goal is attained, the suffering is alleviated. This is because the exchange happened. The hero paid the price, and now, according to the dominant formula, he or she will reap the rewards.

Obviously this isn't always true in real life. Sometimes suffering *is* permanent. Often it doesn't even produce good character in the sufferer the way it does in Dickens or in Kipling.

So again we have a disconnection between the language of Story and the human experience. And that gap points to something.

I think it points to what *should* be. It's not just that the happy ending to life—a life after

death—isn’t a lie. It’s that the price exacted by reality isn’t endless. The way to the Tree of Life was barred by angels with flaming swords, but not forever. And that disconnection from the Tree of Life is what made it possible for the way to be re-opened at Golgotha.

Or perhaps the language of Story is simply reiterating the timeless wisdom of the aged, that suffering should not be wasted, that we must allow it to create in us something worth suffering *for*. Patience. Compassion. Humor.

But even if suffering isn’t baked in, the idea that stories can be fully explained by our selfish drive to survive is wrong. Stories don’t reflect material reality. They only work if there’s a dual reality, if the ghost inside the machine is at least as important as the machine around the ghost.

Nothing makes this point as clearly as suffering. Holocaust survivor and psychologist Viktor E. Frankl wrote, “If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering.”⁵⁰ Which might be why our own sense of value as individuals depends far more on suffering than it does on success or failure. The truth of this is evident in experiences of juxtaposed pain and progress: childbirth, for instance, or physical exercise.

Still, the most important principle here is that of the Price Paid and its connection to the Story Goal. *Something is worth the highest price someone is willing to pay for it.*

What if this applies not just to things, but to people?

I suspect we have all felt the weight of this idea. We all value ourselves highly—far more highly than other people value us. Maybe, if you’re surrounded by a loving family, you know someone who would sacrifice a kidney for you. Perhaps you’ve experienced some sacrifice that has made you overwhelmingly grateful, and even humble. Did you earn that sacrifice? Probably not. And how could you? The value of the transaction came from the other person’s willingness

to pay it.

Or maybe that's not your experience at all. Maybe in your life you recognize that your value comes entirely from what you provide to other people. Deep down you know that whatever people see in you, it mostly has to do with the fact they need you. You're a good employee or have a job that pays the bills.

WW II fighter pilot and Medal of Honor recipient Jefferson J. DeBlanc tells the story of his rescue after being shot down in the pacific. The native islanders who captured him decided the US Army would probably pay handsomely for his return. And they were right! Afterwards, he said, "Most people cannot price out their exact amount of what they are worth. But I know exactly how much I am worth: one ten-pound sack of rice."⁵¹

I love that story, but DeBlanc was wrong. His life was actually worth the *highest* price someone was willing to pay for it. The Army would have paid a lot more.

Here's where this principle cuts to the core of who we are, the central equation of what gives us value as individuals.

Your life is worth the highest price someone is willing to pay for it. And that highest price has already been paid.

There is no other basis for establishing that humans have real value except for this equation. Nothing else in history—besides the sacrifice of Jesus Christ—can imbue your life with intrinsic worth. There is no other source of value.

History has borne this out. Those who embrace the suffering of the cross and the value it confers see that same value in other people.

Those who don't embrace the price paid at Calvary are left trying to establish their own worth based on what they think of themselves. And that doesn't work.

However highly you think of yourself, you can never outbid the price God already paid
for you.

4

The Road to Relevance CONTEXT

As a lifelong student of the English language, I am afflicted with an incurable admiration for Shakespeare. Though it is not his best play in technical terms, *Macbeth* is my favorite, perhaps because it was that play which, back in the 8th grade, convinced me that literature could be cool. Here were witches and battles and murderous madness and prophetic omens and all manner of deception. Even though it was wrapped in antiquated language and phrases that escaped my comprehension entirely, still I loved the sometimes simple artistry of the Bard's turns of phrase and the dramatic tension that kept me striving to unlock what he was actually saying. Why was this story—with blood that would not come off the queen's hands, and demonic tormentors, and a protagonist who embraced evil in spite of the fact he knew it to be wrong—why was this story considered a great work of art?

The answer I would give now differs greatly from the one I would have given back then, which probably would have had more to do with the witches and the sword fighting than with anything related to the play's theme.

My reason for loving *Macbeth* now is due in large part to its frank depiction of the nihilism that results from an abandonment of ultimate meaning. Nowhere is that depiction clearer than when Macbeth learns that his wife the queen is dead, and laments the news as coming at a bad time. And what has all his striving and “vaulting ambition” led him to? Has success without

purpose, without a morality pinned to absolute standards, produced any happiness in his life? On the contrary,

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

- William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene 5

Macbeth might be speaking for all of western culture.

Meaning is currently being sucked out of our lives, and at an alarming rate. Still more alarming is the fact that few people seem to understand why or how. We see the sickness, but cannot name the disease.

Why this is happening may be a matter of debate. But *how* it is happening—the cause of all this sucking—is not mysterious at all.

We're telling the wrong stories. We're erasing the lines that connect the imaginary to the real. We have replaced ultimate meaning with personal preference. We have divorced relevance from context.

Our stories are technically excellent but thematically empty. They are no longer vehicles for reflecting the hard and beautiful truths of reality. Instead, they are stimulants, distracting daydreams, the siren songs of what we want to hear.

Our stories are a kind of dramatic witchcraft that offers kingship through dishonest flattery. As Banquo, Macbeth's lieutenant, puts it: "And oftentimes, to win us to our harm the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray's in deepest

consequence.”⁵²

We see the maddening effects of that betrayal everywhere as the context of reality begins to collapse under the weight of all the fantasies imposed upon it.

It's by pricking our own thumbs that something wicked this way comes.

The Four Layers of Meaning

People often talk about the meaning of life as if it's something so mysterious that it can never really be found. It's like the fountain of youth, or the perpetual motion machine, or the calorie-free dessert.

This is ironic, because most of our lives are centered around the idea that meaning does exist, and that it can be discovered.

Stories wouldn't work at all if meaning didn't exist because stories are essentially buckets for meaning. Most of the meaning in a story originates with the storyteller, but not all of it. Some kinds of meaning are uncovered only through inference. A character or a situation or a symbol speaks to you in particular because of your own life experience.

This is why the question, “What does it mean?” is extremely complicated. If I were to ask you what Mark Twain meant when he wrote *Huckleberry Finn*, the best answer would be, “He meant a lot more than anyone can say quickly.”

Stories, like life, are infused with layered meanings that build on each other. Since *meaning* is just one thing pointing to another, almost anything can be infused with meaning, as long as the intention is communicated in advance. Words and symbols have meaning. Sentences have meaning. Gestures and signs and clothing can all have meaning.

In a written story, **the first practical layer of meaning is words and symbols.**

To read any book, you must understand the grammar and vocabulary of its text. The reason you can read is that you have memorized what words mean, what they are pointing to. So when you read the word *chair*, you know it refers to something you sit on. When you read the word *cat*, you think of a furry house pet with whiskers and an air of superiority. And when you see a period, you know that it indicates the end of a sentence.

cat —> 

chair —> 

. —> 

Notice that these things by themselves are just building blocks. *Cat* is meaningful because it indicates a certain type of animal. But on its own, in a story, it typically wouldn't communicate much else.

To create a second layer of meaning, then, the writer forms sentences by making individual words point not just outside themselves to an object or an action, but also to other words that give them a shared purpose.

Sentences

When words point not just in one direction, but in two, we get a second layer of meaning called a sentence. For instance:

The cat jumped onto the chair.

This sentence is an arrangement of words that each point to some particular thing, such as *cat* to a furry house pet and *jump* to the action of leaping. But notice that when combined this way, each word also points to the other words in the same sentence. This creates a mini-movie in

your imagination. When you read that sentence, you're meant to imagine a cat jumping onto a chair, an action that takes place over time.

Each word is now essentially pointing at two different things, not just one. "Cat" isn't just pointing to a type of animal. It's now pointing to a *particular* cat doing a *particular* thing.

Bear with me, because even though this may seem like grammar school stuff, the implications grow quickly. We're talking about how meaning works. And though we've dealt with meaning all our lives, it's very rarely ever discussed in practical terms.

So the first layer of meaning is words and symbols. **And the second layer of meaning is sentences**, which are created by combining things with only one layer (words) in order to give them two. This is how sentences become new types of signifiers that point outside themselves.

A sentence = a single thought or idea, either a mini-movie or a concept.

To create a third layer of meaning, we must combine sentences in such a way that they don't just point to a single thought or idea, but also point outside themselves to other thoughts and ideas. By pointing outside themselves, they will produce a third layer of meaning.

This is tremendously important. Meaning doesn't come from within. It comes from without. True meaning is always the act of pointing to something on the outside.

The question, then, is, *What sort of meaning is created when sentences are combined? How can they be used to create a new signifier, a third layer of meaning, that points outside itself?*

The obvious answer is paragraphs. But the obvious answer is wrong. Paragraphs do not create a different type of meaning. They're useful in lumping groups of sentences together and in breaking up the flow of text, but they do not point outside themselves.

This is also true of chapters, scenes, and acts. Such units are useful dramatically, but they

do not form a new layer of meaning by becoming a new type of signifier. Like paragraphs, they function as markers for change. But as units of meaning they don't add layers of significance. Instead, they serve as dramatic containers for changes of values that advance the plot.

For instance, a character might be unattached at the beginning of a dinner party, but by the end of the party she is engaged to a complete stranger. This would constitute a scene that adds to the tension of the story as the character moves from “free” to “engaged.” This adds to the third layer of meaning, but does not create a new type of meaning.

A sentence is a single concept or mini-movie, and a scene is a just series of them.

Context

To create a third layer of meaning, then, the storyteller must arrange sentences and scenes and acts in such a way that the unified whole becomes a new signifier—a new sort of experience. Which means **the third layer of meaning is context.**

Context is everything that comes before and after. *Context is the story as a whole.*

How it works isn't hard to understand. That time you were quoted out of context, you may have said as much. Sure, you said those words, which sound really bad when they're turned into gossip. But the way you meant them was something else entirely.

The sentence, “I’m gonna kill you,” might sound funny to the little boy who has just hit his sister with a water balloon. It’s not going to sound funny at all coming from a stranger holding an axe.

So context is created when sentences and scenes are strung together to make a coherent whole, a story that is no longer pointing exclusively to elements within itself, but is now pointing outside itself to something else.

This, as we saw in the first chapter, is the great power of story. The ability to point outside itself to reality is what makes lasting stories function as containers for truth. It's what enables stories to serve as vaults, to convey "classes of experience," to transform the minds and the lives of their audiences.

This is where a fourth layer of meaning is created, in the combination of contexts. A story points outside itself when its internal context, the fictional world of a book or a movie, intersects with a reader's context (or real life experience).

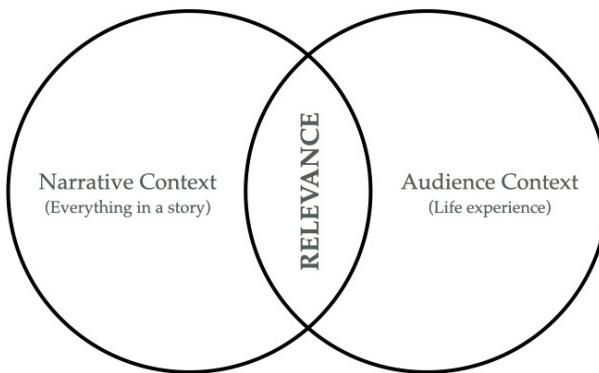
We call the intersection of these contexts *relevance*.

Relevance

Relevance is what happens when a story hits close to home—when it resonates with you and suddenly you feel the story is speaking directly into your life.

Because it is.

This isn't some mystical process. You can actually pinpoint it as the intersection of contexts.



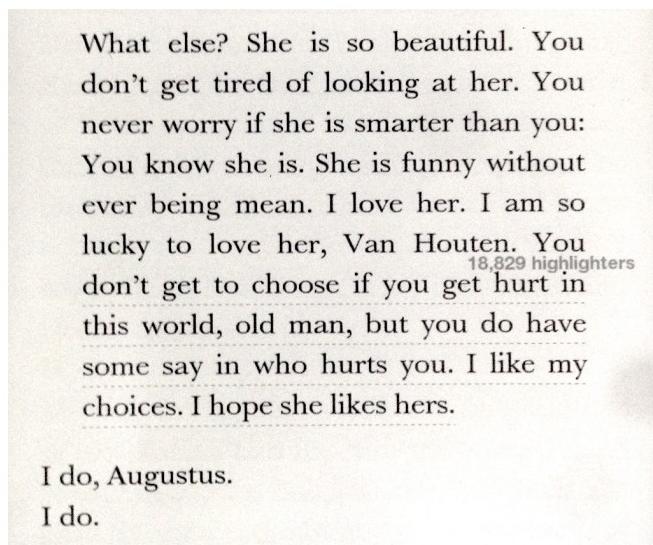
Because every reader brings a different set of life experiences to a story, those moments of relevance will vary from person to person. This doesn't mean such moments are

unpredictable. Nor does it mean that ultimate meaning is an illusion, as some have interpreted Derrida's "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" ("There is no outside-text") to mean.⁵³

Writers and other storytellers *intend* for their work to be relevant. They know what causes emotion. In fact, you can actually see where these intentional moments of relevance hit audiences if you know where to look.

For instance, I read John Green's novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, just a few weeks after it was published. I read it on my kindle with the public highlights feature turned on.

The last page of the story showed me evidence that relevance can be designed. [Spoiler alert: these sentences are taken from the book's last page.]⁵⁴



Notice that the first couple of sentences aren't highlighted at all. But at the time I took this screenshot, one particular sentence had been highlighted almost 19,000 times. And those were just the people who took the trouble to highlight those words—and who had also made their highlights publicly visible.

That is relevance in action. It's the story reaching outside of itself to create meaning in the lives of thousands of readers.

Meaning therefore works in layers. In a written or spoken story, those layers are, in order:

Words and symbols.

Sentences.

Context.

Relevance.

In something like a movie, where the story is told with real visual and audial images instead of imagined ones, you still have four layers of meaning. But a film's building blocks are more direct and so require less work from the audience. In that sense, movies are less participatory than novels and are therefore both more and less powerful.

Still, meaning is created by the combination of syntagms that are not merely chains of signifiers but are new *types* of signifiers. Each successive layer is created by combining more basic ones.

All stories work like this. And the reason they work like this is that life works like this.

The Sender and the Sign

The Old Testament book of *Ecclesiastes* addresses how terrible this problem of meaning really is. Sometimes attributed to Solomon, the book is filled with puzzling meditations on the nature of the world and humanity's place within it. If the "Teacher" of the book is really Solomon, then it was written by a man with plenty of time, virtually limitless resources, an incredible intellect, and wisdom imparted to him by God for the searching out of answers.

At the end of *Ecclesiastes*, Solomon comes to the conclusion that the problem of ultimate meaning is unsolvable.

No one can comprehend what goes on under the sun. Despite all his efforts to search it out, man cannot discover its meaning.⁵⁵

Notice he says we can't "discover" it. He doesn't say we can't *invent* it. The implication of this language is that meaning exists, but under the sun, within the scope of the material universe, our attempts to arrive at an ultimate meaning by ourselves will fail.

In other words, such answers are beyond the reach of human reason.

This makes sense if you understand the implications of the idea that *meaning is one thing pointing to another*.

The cosmos cannot be the origin of its own meaning, nor can anything within it. All of the created universe is, by definition, meaningful only in its relationship to something else, to its creator or Creator, to that which meant for each thing to have a place of significance. Put another way, if meaning cannot be derived from within, then the universe is either meaningless or it depends on something outside the circle of the material universe for its significance and reason for being.

G. K. Chesterton explores this idea in a more direct way in the first chapter of his book, *Orthodoxy*. According to Chesterton, insanity is *logic without truth*.

If a man says (for instance) that men have a conspiracy against him, you cannot dispute it except by saying that all the men deny that they are conspirators; which is exactly what conspirators would do. His explanation covers the facts as much as yours. Or if a man says that he is the rightful King of England, it is no complete answer to say that the existing authorities call him mad; for if he were King of England that might be the wisest thing for the existing authorities to do. Or if a man says that he is Jesus Christ, it is no answer to tell him that the world denies his divinity; for the world denied Christ's.⁵⁶

Chesterton says that you can only cure the man's madness by bringing some truth into the closed circle of his logic.

That point applies here. It demonstrates what has actually happened in the past on a grand

scale. Solomon's dismay wasn't the end of the biblical narrative. The point wasn't that meaning doesn't exist, but that we can't figure out why we're here all on our own.

Humanity has no point of reference. What we needed was for Truth to break into the closed circle of the material universe. A meaning derived from the outside.

That point of connection, or portal, between the material and the non-material, is called *revelation*. At the risk of delving too deeply and too soon into a difficult theological concept, we might even call it *Logos*. But let's stick with the more common term, revelation, or meaning coming from the outside in. Revelation is the immaterial connection between the universe and its creator, between God and humanity.

Revelation is not the same thing as faith, but it is the basis of faith because faith is a response to revelation.

That's why faith is necessary to spiritual regeneration, for a ghost to inhabit the machine. Perhaps that's why Jesus said that everyone born of the Spirit is like the wind: you can't tell where they come from or where they're going.⁵⁷ Their motivations and driving purpose are invisible; the source is outside the box of the material realm.

Semiotics, the study of signs, connections, and meaning, can be useful in wrestling with the implications of how meaning originates and is interpreted.⁵⁸

The diagram below illustrates the four basic elements of simple sign systems. The **sender** is the person or group sending the message. The **sign** is the delivery mechanism: a physical letter, an audible command, a digital text message, etc. The **message** is what's being communicated, and the **receiver** is the one interpreting the sign.⁵⁹

	SENDER	SIGN	MESSAGE	RECEIVER
1	Teacher	Email	No class tomorrow	Students
2	Castaways	SOS	We need help!	Coast Guard

All of this should be somewhat intuitive. When I need to cancel a class, for instance, I typically send an email to my roster of students. That situation is represented in row 1 of the diagram: the **teacher** sends an **email** announcing “**no class tomorrow**” to his **students**. Sender, Sign, Message, Receiver.

Row 2 is similar: a chartered cruise is thrown off-course by a storm and shipwrecked on a deserted island. Perhaps the **castaways** use deadwood to spell **S.O.S.** on the side of a hill. These letters, code for “Save Our Souls,” are recognized internationally as a plea for **help**. When their sign is seen by **the skipper of a Coast Guard** rescue ship, the castaways are saved.

But what happens in situations where the categories are not so obvious? After all, we’ve been looking at ultimate meaning, at revelation as an “immortal connection between the universe and its Creator.” How do situations that are easily explained in human terms—with human situations and human messages—illuminate something as complex as “the *meaning* of life?”

Row 3 below suggests an answer. When we are the sender of the message, the process of meaning-making seems straightforward. I know what I mean to say when I email my students; if there is a breakdown in communication I can typically figure out where it happened. Perhaps there is a typo in my email, or maybe I sent it to the wrong roster. Perhaps one or two of my

students stayed out too late and didn't read the email carefully. As receivers of my message, they have less insight into what I intended, but the context and wording of my email will at least demonstrate that this four-element *process* is clear. Their professor is giving them information about the next class.

	SENDER	SIGN	MESSAGE	RECEIVER
1	Teacher	Email	No class tomorrow	Students
2	Castaways	SOS	We need help!	Coast Guard
3	?	You	?	The world

Row 3 symbolizes Solomon's despair. When I'm neither the Sender nor the Receiver—when I'm the *Sign*—what's the Message? And who sent it?⁶⁰

Solomon answered the second question, but not the first. In fact, he seemed to consider the second answer so obvious that he made no real attempt to prove it. In his view, the answer of ultimate origins was already there in every human heart. What wasn't there was what it all *meant*.

I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.⁶¹

The problem with positing God as the sender, especially to those in a culture shaped around radical individualism,⁶² is that it leaves the message of our lives, the very meaning of our existence, in the hands of someone else. Since we can't have that, we sweep away any notion of

dependence on God, even for meaning, and search for ultimate significance within ourselves.

This at any rate is what mythologist Joseph Campbell concluded:

Life has no meaning. Each of us has meaning and we bring it to life. It is a waste to be asking the question when you are the answer.⁶³

Our modern and post-modern solution is to remove the divine Sender completely. But we will not be satisfied by Solomon's honest but existentially distressing question marks. A fully self-absorbed individualist cannot accept question marks in the Sender and Message columns. Neither can we tolerate the world, large as it is, standing there in the Receiver column to receive the meaning of our lives. Is my life really about someone else, even seven billion someones? Surely it must be about something bigger still. And what could be bigger than the world of the Self?

Besides, the very point of placing the self in the position of the Sender as well as the Sign is that by doing so one can receive a message of one's own choosing.

	SENDER	SIGN	MESSAGE	RECEIVER
1	Teacher	Email	No class tomorrow	Students
2	Castaways	SOS	We need help!	Coast Guard
3	?	You	?	The world
4	[You]	You	[Pick something]	[You]

Thus we arrive at row 4's depiction of the popular myth of meaning as it currently exists in the West. If I am the Sign and its Sender, then its Receiver must be no less significant than my

Self, and its message whatever I desire.

In other words, I am my own god and shall have no other God before me.

My life will mean whatever I want it to.

We know how this ends. You're going to die and so will everyone you love. And then there will be heat death. All the change in the universe will cease, the stars will die, and there'll be nothing left of anything but infinite, dead, freezing void. Human life, in all its noise and hubris, will be rendered meaningless for eternity. ... The cure for this horror is story. Our brains distract us from this terrible truth by filling our lives with hopeful goals and encouraging us to strive for them. What we want, and the ups and downs of our struggle to get it, is the story of us all. It gives our existence the illusion of meaning and turns our gaze from the dread.⁶⁴

The Road to Relevance

We are shaped by stories, and we use stories to shape our understanding of reality. We *build* meaning in layers, and we *interpret* meaning in layers.

This is why, if you have to go to the restroom in the middle of a movie, when you return you always ask, "What did I miss?" You need those basic layers to correctly interpret what you see and hear later.

The reason you need those basic layers is that *everything in a story is meaningful*.

Playwright Anton Chekov memorably expressed this dramatic principle—now known as *Chekov's gun*—when he said, "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there."⁶⁵

This is part of the attraction of immersive storytelling. Anyone who has felt transported to another world while reading will readily understand the pull of Middle Earth or Narnia or Hogwarts. The narrative wizardry that brings such worlds to life is not merely that in the

imagination all of the senses may be fired, but that such firings are, in those other worlds, always meaningful, always significant, always pointing outside themselves to something important.

This sort of all-encompassing significance is what we long for, if not spiritually then psychologically. We want life to be meaningful. And it seems that for much of human history it was. For a time, anyway, people lived as if happenstance didn't happen, but only the ordered story arcs of a trillion trillion atoms in relation to a divine order. In *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, philosopher and Inkling Owen Barfield writes,

“Before the scientific revolution, the world was more like a garment men wore about them than a stage on which they moved. ... Compared with us, they felt themselves and the objects around them and the words that expressed those objects, immersed together in something like a clear lake of—what shall we say?—of ‘meaning’ if you choose.”⁶⁶

This attraction to meaning, even where it may not really exist or where we may not fully recognize it, is what makes stories not just powerful, but addictive.

Life is far more complicated than any story. In a sense, it is *too* complicated to function with the simplicity of a story. Which is to say that if everything in life is meaningful, it would not be possible to recognize all the meanings happening around us at any given moment. Thus it may be the preponderance of meaning in reality that shatters our perception of life as an unfolding story. There is simply too much all at once.

But the more important point is that to the post-modern reader Barfield's “clear lake of meaning” is absurd. We do not see reality as a garment to be worn, a natural shell for a supernatural identity. Our lake of reality is not clear, perhaps not even a lake, but more like a polluted soup of contradictions. We don't subscribe practically to the blind determinism of naturalism (which would destroy our sense of autonomy and self-direction), but neither are we willing to accept the rigid orthodoxies that shaped the world of the Middle Ages. Post-

modernists would rather be hopeless than gullible.

Still, one must have something to live for, some reason for crawling out of bed in the morning. For many, purpose is packaged in the next generation or in the emotional payoff of meeting a private moral standard—raising one’s children, say, or volunteering for a non-profit. But what standard makes these ultimately meaningful? Which compass of Ideals is shaping the story goal of my life? Is it the mere *decision* to see family and good works as meaningful, or is there some yard stick beyond my desires and emotions and beliefs which makes them so?

But even supposing we accept the existential answer that life is what we make of it, even then, how many children or soup kitchens does it take to create a worthwhile life, and how often do these end-goals appear in the drama of day-to-day living? How much of one’s life is spent “impacting the next generation” or “lending a helping hand?” Isn’t life mostly filled with missed appointments that turn out not to have been very important after all, and with food that is neither good nor bad, and with loaded pistols that never go off?

The insurance adjuster who sinks into her cubicle for a dreary shift handling medical claims may do so out of commitment to spouse and children. Perhaps here and there the odd file may stand out as a case for extra attention or even as a “job well done.” But the steady grind of bureaucratic tedium, the weight of artificially-imposed goals, the relentless avalanche of interoffice emails and team meetings and project updates—all of these begin to look like nothing more than random molecules in a cloud of dust. Is the stapler meaningful? The office party? The coffee-stained desk that has lasted longer than any single employee?

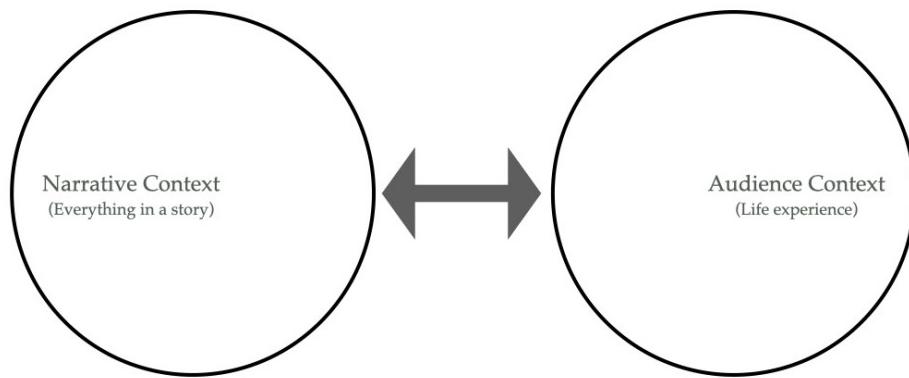
You can bet a story protagonist wouldn’t have to deal with the stapler unless he were dusting it for fingerprints, and if he attended the office party it would only be to meet the love of his life.

In short, it has become increasingly difficult to see the point of *anything* unless it is packaged as a first-person shooter or a seven-season video series.

Our response to this evaporation of meaning has been disastrous. Rather than examining our presuppositions about life, or even looking for significance in unexpected places, we have shifted our search to a different, more arbitrary realm. Instead of using stories as tools for the discovery of ultimate meaning in reality, we are using reality as a tool for the invention of subjective meanings in stories.

Relevance, as the previous Venn diagram showed, is created by the overlapping domains of story context and life experience. But we are no longer striving for this sort of overlap except in our propaganda, which tries to force relevance by removing nuance and exaggerating the already-existing perceptions of the audience.

Instead, contemporary storytelling seems to be rapidly, and perhaps intentionally, moving towards a complete separation of contextual domains.



In other words, our experience of meaning may soon be largely disconnected from anything real. This is not difficult to imagine. All that's required is for every story to stop portraying shared “classes of experience” and begin to create private experiences based on emotional and sensory stimulation. We are already seeing this, I would argue, in the cinematic

depiction of spectacle-over-story that characterizes many blockbuster movies.

The architects of this brave new story world have already created pipelines for an endless supply of content in which everything is superficially meaningful. We are being given technically refined stories in which every stapler and office party is *subjectively* meaningful—because everything inside those stories is tightly controlled.

This, I think, is how meaning is being stripped from our culture: by a series of storytelling shifts that move the context of our stories farther and farther from the internal/external (mind/body) self to the external projection of self—to avatars of individual identity.

The first step was to remove our stories from the realm of the imagination to the realm of the senses. When reading a novel, for instance, one is forced to either engage the mind's eye and experience its descriptions and dialogue and exposition internally, or you will abandon the story altogether. One must imagine the goblins and forests and battles of Middle Earth to experience *The Lord of the Rings* as it was written. But if you are watching the film version very little is required except that you keep your eyes open. All of the imagining has already been done by the producers and actors and digital artists before the movie even starts. This is why I call this a first step. A story experienced on a silver screen has been removed from the internal world of the imagination to the external world of the audio-visual.

We are long past this first step. A cinema is a physical space that carries its own sensory thumbprint: the smell of popcorn, the sticky residue of fountain drinks underfoot, the dramatic lighting of curtains and aisles. A movie theater is at least a real building situated in a geographic space. Today we carry cinemas in our pockets. Which means we can experience a spectacle-story almost anywhere, at any time—on an airplane or in bed or sitting across from one's spouse at a

restaurant. We no longer need a specific context, a socially acceptable time and place that is appropriate for consuming a story, because stories are now available in *every* time and place. We carry an endless supply of them in our digital devices.

But we are farther along than even this. It is not just that our stories have been moved outward to our senses, or even that our consumption of stories is no longer connected to physical times and places. The third step has been the removal of the audience itself to a virtual realm. In fact, we are seeing the early migration of human identities from physical bodies to digital avatars. The body and soul are being rended not through death, but through a displacement of identity.

Millennials were the first to experience this third step. Gen-Zers are farther along still, having started the process at an earlier age and in a more effective form. It is not just that children are being raised on screens, nor that they consume stories in the form of video games and apps and streaming programs. The larger problem is that their entire lives are increasingly experiences online. Education, socialization, entertainment, activism, relational intimacy—all of these are being off-loaded to virtual space. The tablet is not just a device; it is a window into an alternate reality where anyone's identity can be tailor made. Consequently, the context of many people's real lives, especially that of many teens, is digital experiences projected outside the skin.

They live largely solitary lives, inextricably connected to their phones but largely disconnected from parents, churches, and communities. Instead, they eat alone, they study alone, they even socialize alone in a virtual world untethered to the physical. They are often friendless and depressed, which explains why they harm themselves and commit suicide at a rate unrivaled in American history—a history, incidentally, that they see as a sordid tale of endless oppression and sprawling injustices.⁶⁷

While this characterization may be somewhat hyperbolic, it nonetheless reveals why it is helpful to understand how meaning is stacked in layers. For those who are offloading their embodied experiences to the internet, a story will feel artificially meaningful when that internal context (what happens in a video game) overlaps with their experiences in other virtual spaces. Relevance isn't perceived as a connection between a story and your real, embodied life, but between a story and everything you've experienced online. As long as Kate identifies sufficiently as KittnLover232, and as long as the events and people of a virtual story world point outside that world to other experiences in her virtual space, she will feel a temporary sense of relevance suggestive of absolute meaning.

That sense is an illusion for the simple reason that KittnLover232 is not Kate, however much of herself she plugs into it.

Still, an artificial sense of meaning may seem better than no meaning at all, especially in a world where the collective library of stories is almost limitless. The downside of a lifetime spent scratching this existential itch is that you can never be sufficiently provoked to uncover the source of the rash. Artificial purpose may feel good, but it isn't good if it keeps you from finding the real thing. This is why I say that these new story strategies are doomed to fail. They may be effective at satisfying the lust for spectacle and raw sensation that drives our baser instincts, what Elon Musk calls "the monkey brain,"⁶⁸ but they cannot make the leap from virtual to physical. Kate may spend a great deal of her time as KittnLover232, but the reverse is impossible. KittnLover232 will never attempt to be Kate. In short, you cannot get full by watching a projection of yourself eat, no matter how delicious the food appears to be.

The incarnation, in other words, reminds us of and re-establishes for us our identity as given by God and saves us from the error of supposing that it is defined by the world (or its tokens, such as cash) in itself. Rather, the world is the language through which we

speak who we are, the words that point to what is beyond them, the envelope in which the card that announces the honors bestowed on us is concealed.⁶⁹

Stories, as I said previously, are buckets for meaning. They are designed to overlap with the real world. This is why our stories today are failing so badly to satisfy our need for meaning and purpose. Our stories are rich only in subjective meaning, not ultimate meaning, because subjective meaning is the only kind our storytellers can imagine. Consequently, our thirst for something transcendent isn't quenched. The two sorts of meaning, subjective and ultimate, are simply not interchangeable. They are as different as salt water and fresh. Indeed, the time is perhaps not far off when we will have, "Water, water, everywhere / Nor any drop to drink."⁷⁰

There is only one way to end this consuming thirst and starvation diet, at least in story terms, and that is to begin at once drinking fresh water and eating real food, nourishing food, not just the junk food offerings of our cultural vending machines. We must insist that reality is not just *a* domain, but *the* domain, the *natural* domain of Story. "All of life is story, story unraveling and revealing meaning."⁷¹ We must demand true relevance.

Which means acknowledging what the language of Story has been telling us all along. The sort of meaning we long for—especially in the here and now of our confusion and pain and boredom—is not unattainable or illusory. Reality is more than a random explosion of matter or of blind determinate chemistry.

Story is telling us this. That is one of its functions; to remind us that the road to relevance is overlapping contexts. And not just human contexts, nor even the meta contexts of digital spaces or of massive catalogs of streaming entertainment.

True relevance is only possible in a real world beyond our control, and thus part of a story so large it can only be understood by those who dare to live within it.

5

The Best Theme Park Ever

THEME

One reason superhero movies became so popular in the early 21st century is that the technology of the cinema finally caught up with the dramatic genius of comic book artists. There are undoubtedly many other reasons, but this one is as foundational as it is unintuitive.

Comic books are a more primitive format that relies on a much older technology. So why did the newer technology of filmmaking need advanced computer imaging to catch up?

The answer lies in the nature of the two mediums. Novels, which represent an even older technology, often translate poorly to the big screen because that which can easily be imagined in the mind's eye is often extremely difficult to produce in reality. I can mentally conjure a skyscraper in a split second, whereas building one downtown might take years.

Comic book artists work with static images displayed chronologically—not unlike Egyptian hieroglyphics.⁷² Where movies have the luxury of presenting visual and audial sounds at the speed of life, comics have only ever had motionless images paired with text. Readers must therefore move from image to image, internally combining the representational art of the page with its accompanying text to translate what they see and read into a hybrid story experience.

The reader, viewer, listener, usually grossly underestimates his importance. If a reader cannot create a book along with the writer, the book will never come to life. Creative involvement: that's the basic difference between reading a book and watching TV. In watching TV we are passive; sponges; we *do* nothing. In reading

we must become creators.⁷³

This focus on static images seems to have stretched the development of the medium and nourished an artistic philosophy that prioritizes visual emotion, particularly the emotions of wonder, horror, and humor. Comic artwork aims for maximum emotional impact in every panel of every page, and it does so by pushing the limits of contrast, scale, perspective, and, most of all, of dramatic tension.

In other words, the graphic novel industry learned how to tell stories visually through stylized snapshots that capture the essence of a story in its most primal, sense-based form.

Enter Hollywood, which took far longer than might have been expected to understand that superheroes are not just “kid stuff” but representations of a very old story pattern. The static images of comic art may be primitive, but that’s actually what gives them such enormous power to move us. In fact, the implied dramatic tension of a well-designed single image is sometimes more interesting than a full-length feature film. Provocative static images as conceived by comic artists require interpretation, which actively invites the audience into the process of story creation.

The problem with some films is that they show too much. Empowered by massive budgets and advanced visual technology, filmmakers seem unable to restrain themselves. They have too many tools at their disposal. Perhaps because they don’t respect the shared humanity of their audience, they fear to leave anything unsaid. But when nothing is unsaid, can anything be *truly* said? How is it that so many superhero flicks begin with nuances reflecting the human condition only to end at the violence of fistfights and explosions? Why do so many films resort to mere stimulation? Our cinema is too often the whiz-bang equivalent of the Roman Coliseum, bloodless and heartless and leaving in its wake smears of popcorn and soda rather than blood. Spectacle is no longer difficult, and it was never all that interesting. The true domain of

storytelling is exploration.

Take for example the pre-release movie poster for *Man of Steel*, which depicts a handcuffed Superman standing between heavily armed soldiers. Over his right shoulder a brilliant flare of light shines, illuminating his face even as it shadows those of his apparent captors. He could break the cuffs without effort, without really trying. Perhaps he is trying *not* to break them. And why? Because their restraint is symbolic, not literal, and the meaning of that symbolism is both obvious and subtle. Obvious because the tension is so intentional. We are *meant* to wonder what it means that Superman is handcuffed. How has he run afoul of the Law? And to what sort of Law can he be held accountable? If he has done something immoral he is no longer Superman but a villain. Since this is unimaginable, we are left to ponder a more startling and disruptive question, namely, What if the Law to which Superman must answer is itself corrupt? Can he be the Superman we've come to know and respect if he stands in opposition to human authority? But in that case, what do we have to rely on? There is only one Superman, but the wheels of government, of the Justice system, of our whole order of civilization, must go grinding on or there will be nothing left for those of us who are not superhuman. Even a bad government—and all governments are bad in their own way (though some much worse than others)—still even a *bad* government is better than anarchy. That at least is one of the basic assumptions of every culture. Things could be worse, and “worse” will arrive quickly in the absence of a restraining system.

So this poster of Superman in handcuffs overflows with dramatic tension in the form of implied questions and visual dilemma. What will Superman do? And when he does whatever that is, what we will do in response? Whose side will we be on? And how can there even be a right answer to that question?

In great fiction, the dream engages us heart and soul; we not only respond to imaginary things—sights, sounds, smells—as though they were real, we respond to fictional problems as though they were real. We sympathize, think, and judge. We act out, vicariously, the trials of the characters and learn from the failures and successes of particular modes of action, particular attitudes, opinions, assertions, and beliefs exactly as we learn from life. Thus the value of great fiction, we begin to suspect, is not just that it entertains us or distracts us from our troubles, not just that it broadens our knowledge of people and places, but also that it helps us to know what we believe, reinforces those qualities that are noblest in us, leads us to feel uneasy about our faults and limitations.⁷⁴

This at any rate is what the poster promises. In one image it implies a powerful underlying theme that fits a character like Superman, who is simultaneously archetypal and inhuman. And the theme it promises is that *Man of Steel* will be a story about Principle vs. Power.

Sadly, the film is *not* a story about Principle vs. Power. It is a story about Principled Power vs. Unprincipled Power. What begins in its first Act as an examination of the right use of Power (and of the dangerous effects Power has on the human soul) has by its climax become an examination of how much collateral damage two supermen would cause when beating each other senseless in a modern metropolis. In the beginning we are told that Power is wondrous but also addictive and dangerous. By the end we are led to believe that what really matters is that the Principled Power must defeat the Unprincipled Power at any cost. Superman *must* win, no matter how many people are crushed beneath the rubble of collapsed buildings in the process. And it is of course Superman who emerges victorious from the film's thirty-minute concluding CGI spectacle.

Lest anyone mistake me for a highbrow critic who can't stand the entertainment of the masses, I freely admit that I sometimes *like* spectacles in action flicks. I have enjoyed many

Marvel and DC superhero movies. In the right mood, I sometimes find explosions, car chases, shootouts, stunt men crashing onto tables from upper balconies, dogfights in space between futuristic fighters, martial arts combat, and lengthy cowboy fisticuffs to be relaxing. I watch them the same way that I watch my two cavochon pups chase each other around the yard, mildly amused and distantly curious about which one will top the other. But I do not expect to encounter therein a theme. At best I might feel engagement of the sort delivered by a football game. But games and spectacles are rarely stories.

I have not singled out *Man of Steel* because I don't like it (I do), but because its poster demonstrates the power of theme in a way the actual movie does not, and I think this fact can be instructive.

If you ask someone what a movie or book is about, you are likely to hear a synopsis of its plot. But a story's plot is not what a story is *about*. That role belongs to its theme. Stories use character arcs and turning points and the dramatic tension of disasters and dilemmas to create classes of experience that speak to us of reality. Those things are part of the language of Story. But they are *how* the story speaks, not *what* the story speaks.

A good story does, indeed, entertain us, and it embodies human experience in such a way as to lead us to relive it along with the characters in the story. But a story is also intended by the author to convey a message. Further, this message can at some point be formulated as ideas. The literary term for such ideas is *themes* (generalizations about life).⁷⁵

Leland Ryken's definition of theme as a *generalization about life* is useful, and even though it is an oversimplification to say that every story can be reduced to a quantifiable summary or formula about life, yet there is some truth in this. The danger here lies in our tendency to equate formula with solution, to mistake a map for the roadways it represents. I know the basic ingredients of the finest wines in the world; my father was an amateur winemaker

and to this day I can vividly recall the aromas of that process. But I do not have the actual wines—either my father's or those of, say, Albert Bichot. It is not enough to have the formula. One must also have what is tangible and touchable—be it a bruise or a beefsteak, or, as so often happens in life, a beefsteak sacrificed for a bruise. Without something to swirl in a glass, in other words, what good is a list of ingredients? A theme extracted from its story has no persuasive power.

Nevertheless, themes are sometimes worth extracting, either for the sake of learning how stories work or, more practical still, for the sake of putting into words what you have already understood a different way.

“The best art always allows us to come in, to see something of ourselves that we would not be able to see or know otherwise.”⁷⁶

Napoleon could not put into words what he experienced in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid of Giza, and something was lost to history. Perhaps he could not put into words what he experienced because he didn't have the requisite humility for true revelation, and his time in the heart of that wondrous mountain was the sort of experience had by anyone who dismisses a truth they are not ready for.

Maybe Napoleon would have understood better what he encountered at Giza had he gone there after his defeat at Waterloo.

Theme Park

Many accomplished storytellers who have written about the nature of narrative art say two compatible but not necessarily intuitive things about it. First, they say that stories can't be reduced to a simple formula, and second, that stories tend to work by embodying ideals or values in the actions of their characters. In *Les Misérables*, for instance, the clash between Inspector

Javert and ex-criminal Jean Valjean demonstrates the subtleties of the timeless conflict between Judgment and Mercy. *Romeo And Juliet* is a kind of dramatized argument; in it Shakespeare shows us the destructive power of tribal hatred and the one principle—love—which is strong enough to diffuse it. In *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens depicts the unraveling of Scrooge's self-absorption through the revelatory visitations of four spirits, and in so doing convinces us of a theme that is easy to accept but hard to live: *the business of every life is the welfare of others*. Even James Barrie's classic children's tale, *Peter Pan*, is telling a profound but difficult truth through the action of its whimsical plot, namely, that *Innocence is heartless*.

But the reduction of any given story into its corresponding embedded generalizations about life is not the most important or interesting thing about the story element we call *theme*. What matters here is that we take these thematic generalizations, based as they are on a universal moral compass of Ideals, to be true without recognizing where they come from or what they themselves are pointing to.

Stories work best when their meaning derives from the action and characters of their events. Lessons that are tacked on as moral finger-wagging will be disregarded by the audience. Even when those expository sermons embedded oh-so-cleverly in a character's dialogue are agreeable to us, we aren't changed by them. We don't value meaning that we don't arrive at ourselves. If you don't go through the emotional and intellectual work of dissecting a story in your own mind, if you don't put the pieces together yourself, you won't internalize what it's teaching you.

This is why ideals have so much power not just to make us feel deep emotions, but to influence us for better or worse. Love and Hatred and Responsibility and Revenge and Honesty and Greed are part of the grammar of Story because they're so interwoven into our real lives that

we take them for granted. We won't all agree on the fine points of religion. But we do mostly agree about what Honesty is, or Selfishness, or Courage, etc.

In other words, Ideals are self-evident, and because they are self-evident, they are almost universally understood. They serve as a bridge between storyteller and audience.

Aristotle saw virtues as existing in the place of balance between excess and deficiency; extravagant modesty, for instance, might really be a form of attention-seeking. A more refined approach to the virtues is perhaps the one accepted by both Greek and Christian thinkers, what are sometimes referred to as the cardinal virtues: *prudence, temperance, justice, and courage*.⁷⁷ The theological virtues of *faith, hope, and love* are derived directly from the Bible, and yet they are widely accepted as virtues in stories when embodied subtly in the actions of the characters.

Whatever our basis for the ideals or virtues, humans use them in the interpretation of stories. Nor is it necessary to define precisely what these virtues are for an audience to be motivated and persuaded through their use. We all seem to have a moral compass, whatever that represents, and it is accessible to the storyteller in service of dramatic art.

Take Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* for instance. The novel's thematic clash is unusual in that it pits Chaos vs. Control. In the story, humans have figured out how to recreate dinosaurs by retrieving their genetic information from DNA found in prehistoric mosquitos embedded in amber. This power—the power to restore life and use it for the amusement of tourists and the making of wealth—is contrasted against a subtle but pervasive feeling that something about this process is wrong. When reading the book, I want to go to Jurassic Park as a tourist and see living sauropods and velociraptors and triceratops for myself. The sense of wonder at human ingenuity and the grandeur of nature is palpable. At the same time, I cannot escape the tension inherent in the premise: What can go wrong probably will go wrong. And then

what?

Chaos and Control are the keywords, but as Ideals they are really stand-ins for humility and arrogance. Over and over Hammond and his scientists assert their domination, their ability to control nature and prevent the sort of unexpected consequences that have accompanied advances in technology down through history. Jurassic Park is an island, so the dinosaurs can't escape; everything that goes in or out of Isla Noblar is strictly controlled. Moreover, the animals are kept in extremely high tech pens made of steel and concrete. These walls are topped with electrified fences. The power grid has redundant backups in case of storm or other calamity. Nor can the animals reproduce naturally, for they have all been created female. The dinosaur population is tracked by computer, and just in case anything should go wrong in spite of all these controls, the island has its own world-class hunter who is capable of manually locating and eliminating any nasty surprises.

Furthermore, Crichton is always two steps ahead of us, answering our questions well before we think to ask them, and pointing out that the park is extremely *safe* because it is extremely *controlled*. Nothing has escaped InGen's attention to detail.

At the same time, all of this control make us uneasy because we can't help but associate it with arrogance. We know in our bones that Ian Malcolm, the chaos theorist, is right to warn Hammond and the others that they can never think of everything; chaos will break down the illusion of control and expose the hubris latent in the whole project.

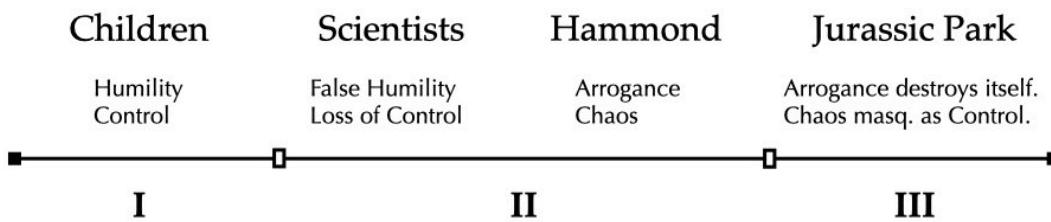
The theme of *Jurassic Park* is therefore that *humanity cannot control nature*.

Yes, I understand that it's a story about dinosaurs eating people. But Michael Crichton didn't write the book to say, "Dinosaurs would eat people if they got the chance." He wrote it to say, "The *reason* dinosaurs would eat people if they got the chance is that humans cannot control

nature."

At heart, *Jurassic Park* is a validation of Humility, a way to reinforce in us a respect for Nature and a realistic understanding of our place within it.

THE IDEALS OF **Jurassic Park**



In chapter two I described Story's ubiquitous moral compass as a giant nautical compass loaded with positive and negative ideals. I return to this idea because Story themes are not just generalizations about life. They are arguments about which side of the Ideal scale, Positive or Negative, is better. And not just better, but more powerful, and more likely to prevail in real life.

Now the astonishing thing about the language of Story is that, from the standpoint of theme, stories almost always side with the Ideal that *doesn't* win in real life—or doesn't seem to. After all, in real life do humble people really make it farther than those who sound their own horn? We like to pretend they do. But do they really?

Because Ideals in stories can be separated into Positive and Negative sides, it is possible to explore what the Ideals found on each side of the compass have in common. How are they actually aligned, and why?

In dramatic terms it seems that Positive Ideals are usually expressed as principles that lack any worldly or human power. Love, Honesty, Courage, etc. are rarely associated with armies or politicians or wealth. On the other hand, Negative Ideals are often appealing because

of their association with the sorts of power that yield immediate gratification. Hatred, Lies, Revenge, Betrayal, etc. are almost always demonstrated in terms of raw power. In Star Wars, it's the dark side of the Force that makes power easy. All you have to do is sacrifice your principles.

Seen this way, Story's moral compass of Ideals is divided into Ideals of Principle and Ideals of Power. Which means that the language of Story seems to be telling us, and telling us repeatedly and insistently, that Principle will always win in the end. In spite of the fact that it often doesn't seem to.

How often has the experience of living taught us the opposite message? Don't the powerful usually win in life, at least judging by the short term outcomes of a single life?

So why does Story almost universally take the opposite approach and side with Principle? After all, if the point is survival, and the main driving reality is "Nature, red in tooth and claw,"⁷⁸ why should Honesty be more important than Lies, or Forgiveness better than Revenge?

The first and most obvious answer is that winning through Power always comes at a cost. It's a compromise that means short-term success but long-term failure. Sure, Hitler won enormous power through the betrayal of his friends and the seizure of government and the genocide of millions of his countrymen. But he also committed suicide in an underground bunker and is now universally despised. So perhaps Story is telling us that it is better to play the long game and look beyond the comfort of our current circumstances. Perhaps Story embodies the wisdom of eternity and aims to teach us to live for a better future. After all, you will never have enough power to overcome the sort of power that can be arrayed against you from those who have no principles. Principled Power can never be as extreme as its unprincipled counterpart because it will always be limited by the boundaries of virtue. Kidnappers are, in this sense, always more powerful than parents.

A second answer to this question may be that Story is trying to tell us is Principle *should* defeat Power, even when it doesn't. The language of Story would therefore be based on an ultimate scale rather than a relative one. It would, in fact, be conveying a meaning that is derived from outside or beyond the mechanistic resources of the material universe. In which case the few rare stories that demonstrate power prevailing over principle exist not to make us power-hungry but to make clear the awful consequences of turning, so to speak, to the dark side of the Force.

This implies **a third answer**, that Story *must* allow the Negative Ideals their place on the stage or the moral compass cannot function as true. The only way a story can prove that the Positive Ideal is always better than its Negative counterpart is for its fences to come down. Every Negative must be allowed inside. Any theme park that doesn't allow *all* the Ideals to compete is not really a theme park but a playground.

Science fiction writer Madeleine L'Engle, author of the beloved YA novel *A Wrinkle in Time*, connects all art to a beating back of the forces of chaos.

Leonard Bernstein tells me more than the dictionary when he says that for him music is cosmos in chaos. That has the ring of truth in my ears and sparks my creative imagination. And it is true not only of music; all art is cosmos, cosmos found within chaos. At least all Christian art (by which I mean all true art...) is cosmos in chaos. There's some modern art, in all disciplines, which is not; some artists look at the world around them and see chaos, and instead of discovering cosmos, they reproduce chaos, on canvas, in music, in words. As far as I can see, the reproduction of chaos is neither art, nor is it Christian.⁷⁹

Reality is the *only* true theme park. In life you are free to do a good turn to your neighbor just as you are free to do him a bad one. He might even do you a bad turn while you are doing good to him. Moreover, "good" and "bad" are not subjective. They point to ultimate moral standards. Which means that if Story is right, then we're living in a world of real Ideals, acting

out a fantastically complex story that has at its heart a universal theme of Principle being opposed by Power. Viewed through the lens of Story, planet Earth is something like an enormous and complicated set on which the drama of life is spooling out a meaning derived from outside the matter and energy of the cosmos. “All the world’s a stage,” Shakespeare wrote, “And all the men and women merely players...”⁸⁰

We are living, in other words, inside the best theme park ever, even if it is not always the most fun. This may be harsh, but it’s also beautiful. Our world is not just a place of random event; it is a place of Ideals.

How we respond to them is what defines us as humans.

But there is **a fourth reason** that Story always sides with Principle over Power, a reason that can summed up in the South African word, *ubuntu*.

u·bun·tu |ˈoo'bōontoo, ˌoo'bōontoo|

noun *South African*

a quality that includes the essential human virtues; compassion and humanity: *there is a need for understanding not vengeance, ubuntu not victimization.*

Ubuntu is identity grounded in relationship. It means *I am not me without you*. As semiotician Crystal Downing puts it, “Personhood is negated without community.”⁸¹

What makes *ubuntu* relevant here is that it so clearly embodies the unifying basis of all Positive Ideals. What do Love, Courage, Honesty, Compassion, Mercy, Truth, and Humility have in common? Each of them is based in some way on the supporting or lifting up the Other. Every positive ideal or value depends on relationship for the meaning of its existence. Love is not Love without the beloved. Kindness and Mercy cannot exist without an object of action. Honesty is impossible without someone who hears the truth. Even courage is based on a sense of allegiance to a larger community. Relationality, *ubuntu*, is the North Star of the moral compass.

Virtues are the free gifts of God and Christ to us. ... it is our nature as human persons to be in relationship with God. Even when we do not know the source of the gift, it is God who enables us to become fully human.⁸²

We cannot be ourselves apart from someone else, apart from some larger community—a family or a clan or a tribe or a village, however small these may be. Nor can we be ourselves apart from a relationship with our Creator, because it is only in God that we find an external source of meaning.

... all the virtues are synonymous; whether they are called fear, wisdom, or prudence, they have the same origin and the same end. All are gifts of God; they are directed to eternal life and awaken desire for it.⁸³

This is why the Negative Ideals are all connected by their opposition to the full formation of human identity through relationship. Hatred, Selfishness, Cowardice, Falsehood, Control, etc. all place the Self above the Other. They say, “I don’t need you in order to be me. In fact, to be fully me, I need not-you.” And this of course is a lie. In sacrificing Principle for Power one is sacrificing the other for the self. But this sacrifice is really a *destruction* of the self, for you cannot choose the self over the other without erasing your own humanity.

Power without Principle is therefore inhuman, but the converse is not true. Principal doesn’t need worldly Power in order to be human. Principle, in that sense, is divine. It has its origins in God, and is a reflection of the heart of God.

What binds the Positive Ideals together is that they are all expressions of the phrase, “God is love.” The eternal relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the basis of everything good and true and beautiful. And God has extended that image in and through us.

The Christian system is consistent as no other system that has ever been. It is beautiful beyond words, because it has that quality to it that no other system completely has—you begin at the beginning,

and you can go to the end. It is as simple as that. *And every part and portion of the system can be related back to the beginning.* Whatever you discuss, to understand it properly, you just go back to the beginning, and the whole thing is in its place. The beginning is simply that God exists and that he is the personal-infinite God. Our generation longs for the reality of personality, but it cannot find it. But Christianity says personality is valid because personality has not just appeared in the universe but rather is rooted in the personal God who has always been.⁸⁴

This is what Story is telling us, that *I am not me without you*. And if I am not me without you, then I cannot sacrifice you without sacrificing myself. I cannot choose Power over Principle without becoming something less than human, something demonic, something antithetical to *tov*: something false and ugly and evil.

If the language of Story is to be believed, then such a surrender of our humanity would be worse than death, and no amount of temporal power could compensate us for the loss.

6

God in the Hands of Angry Sinners VOICE

At its box office closing in July of 2004, Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, became the highest grossing R-rated film of all time, clearing more than \$370 million in cinema sales alone.⁸⁵ This would have been a remarkable feat for any independently produced film lacking significant distribution. Even more incredible were the astonishing and counter-intuitive facts of its artistic vision. Gibson not only hired relatively unknown actors, he also depicted all of the film's dialogue in dead languages unknown to most movie-goers and focused his entire story arc on the gruesome realities of the crucifixion of Jesus. The movie is dark, brutally violent, and quintessentially Catholic.

This last trait, while obviously not a measure of artistry, is notable given that the success of the film depended largely on support from protestants. "That Gibson borrowed so freely from Sr. Anna Katharina Emmerich's nineteenth-century meditations on Christ's Passion does not matter to Protestants,"⁸⁶ writes critic Stuart D. Robertson. "It is the emotions the movie stirs that are its biggest draw."⁸⁷

What makes all of this so surprising is that American Evangelicals had not supported artistic depictions of religious themes in any form—not in significant numbers, anyway—for almost a century. That is, there were no culturally significant novels or films or stage plays supported by (much less born out of) the American Evangelical movement in living memory. So

why were churchgoers now turning out in droves to watch the flesh-rending torture of Gibson's R-rated *Passion*? Or, as Frank Pittman wrote in May of 2004, when the film was at the peak of public awareness, "Who are these millions of people who are coming by the busload from churches all over the countryside and finding a heartfelt spiritual experience, and at times spasms of religious ecstacy, in this exercise in nonstop cruelty?"⁸⁸

Had something about Evangelicalism changed? Or was it this *particular* movie, this *particular* representation of a two-thousand-year-old subject, that was different?

The answer, in hindsight, seems clear. No other religious film has achieved such cultural ubiquity since 2004. Nor has any other religious film dared to break so many genre and medium expectations. *The Passion* stands alone as an economic anomaly because of its relentless and aggressive commitment to be artistically different. In short, evangelicals supported the film not because they had changed their minds about art, but because an artist had changed his mind about them.

While this may speak to the artistic creativity of Mel Gibson as a director (though some would say more cynically that it speaks to his creativity as a marketer), it leads to an unflattering conclusion regarding evangelicals. Why exactly was this film—which demonstrates at the very least that the gospel story can be depicted in creative, compelling, and canny ways—such an aberration? Where had evangelical filmmakers been the last hundred years or more? Where were the novelists and playwrights? While the church in Great Britain was giving its culture the writings of George MacDonald and G. K. Chesterton and C. S. Lewis, where were the American writers of similar caliber and confession? What exactly was the church in the “land of the free and the home of the brave” doing with its freedom, its bravery?

They were doing politics.

As a nation, nineteenth century America had been steeped in Christian tradition. Two great awakenings, thousands of Methodist circuit riders, Baptist revivals, and a political environment that frequently assumed the language and values of the bible, had all worked to forge an identity that would later be remembered by evangelicals as a golden age for the American church. But by the dawn of the twentieth century, the challenges of theistic evolution and higher critical theory—and their combination into a “New Theology” that saw humans as inherently good rather than inherently depraved—had begun to force fundamentalists (including many evangelicals) into a defensive posture.⁸⁹

In his groundbreaking book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Nathan Hatch argues that by the early twentieth century, evangelicals perceived that the battle for the soul of the nation would have to be fought from behind the barricades of a Christian subculture. Furthermore, the weapons of that war would be inherently political in nature, taking the form of institutions and organizations rather than of stories and works of art.

These populist instincts were only reinforced by Fundamentalism’s loss of influence within mainline denominations and by the ridicule it received in centers of high culture—most noticeably after the Scopes trial concerning evolution in 1925. Antagonistic to modern intellectual and institutional arrangements, populist Protestants built their own extensive networks of seminaries, liberal arts colleges, Bible schools, youth organizations, foreign mission boards, publishing houses, conferences, and camps.⁹⁰

Historian George Marsden echoes this idea, placing the Scopes trial (following so quickly on the heels of a disillusioning world war) at the center of a shift in evangelicalism away from direct engagement with American culture. It seemed the world was just getting worse and worse, and the only thing to do was try to save souls out of it.

Meanwhile, William Jennings Bryan and other fundamentalists campaigned to ban the teaching of Darwinism in American

schools. The ridicule heaped on Bryan at the Scopes trial in Tennessee in 1925 and his subsequent sudden death marked a turning point for the movement. It quickly lost its position as a nationally influential coalition. Yet as fundamentalists retreated from their notorious national campaigns, they were relocating and building a substantial subculture.⁹¹

The humiliation of evangelicals inflicted in the newspapers during the Scopes trial—epitomized by H. L. Mencken’s withering and (as would become evident later) dishonest coverage—was the proverbial last straw. Scopes may not have been the main factor in the retreat of evangelicals from the culture, but it was the turning point. As faithful protestants surveyed the wreckage of the divinely-blessed previous century, they decided the culture was already lost. If the world war and a global pandemic were not proof enough, here was undeniable evidence that something had gone so terribly wrong that only God could put it right: humans were now monkeys, and proud of the fact. Better to throw lifelines to the drowning than to swim in such poisonous currents.

Which is not to say that evangelicals lost all hope for the nation. Instead, they hoped to change the culture from without rather than from within. Indeed, in the early twentieth century, American believers were sometimes advised not to even read newspapers or other “counterfeit” literature except in the course of biblical studies.⁹² The deceptiveness of satanic lies in print and entertainment media was an all-too-present danger. Thus, evangelicals developed a “strategy of withdrawal.”⁹³

If secular Americans were to be saved from the ravages of modernist thought, it would have to be through the grace of preaching that pierced their individual darkness, or through the machinations of politics overturning devilish social and educational systemic schemes. This latter, more collective impulse, according to Marsden, was probably the stronger one. “By the 1920s,” he writes, “the one really unifying factor in fundamentalist political and social thought

was the overwhelming predominance of political conservatism.”⁹⁴

In short, American Evangelicals had—and largely still have—a deep reluctance to leave the safe confines of protestant subculture when pursuing the arts. We will come out for politics, but not play.

For the last hundred years we have seen the gospel and its relationship to society through doctrinal and propositional lenses. This is ironic given that the nineteenth century’s paradigmatic shift was from away from a doctrinal focus and towards more narrative preaching.⁹⁵ But while a narrative approach to preaching may have been fuel for the revivalist fires of the 1800s, it apparently could not compete with the twentieth century’s resurgence of propositional views found in Darwinian naturalism and higher critical theory.

Stories from the Nineteenth Century

Perhaps this is why few significant filmmakers, novelists, or playwrights emerged from the cocoon of evangelical subculture to engage modernist or postmodernist thought in twentieth century America. Instead, the church kept her writers busy with sermons, devotionals, and bible-based morality tales targeted at other evangelicals. The few filmmakers who dared to tell biblical stories tended to come from the ranks of the Catholic church (Frank Capra) or of the functionally unchurched (Cecil B. DeMille).

What makes this so fascinating is that the nineteenth century is full of examples of the American church engaging freely and fully in the secular waters of arts, entertainment, and journalism. For instance:

1. Harriett Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), while not the great American novel (or perhaps even a good novel), was hugely influential in shaping public opinion regarding slavery. Stowe’s son recounted later that Lincoln greeted his

mother by saying, “So this is the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war.”⁹⁶

2. In 1893 *McClure's Magazine*, credited with the development of muckraking journalism, was founded and staffed by two dozen alumni of Knox College (itself founded by Presbyterians and Congregationalists from New York state) who were deeply committed to social reform based on Christian ethics.⁹⁷ John Phillips, a founding partner of the magazine, had been raised in an abolitionist home that functioned as a station on the underground railway.⁹⁸ The magazine established a reputation for literary excellence,⁹⁹ publishing serialized novels and nonfiction by such writers as Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, Jack London, Mark Twain, and Robert Louis Stevenson.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, it based its principled journalism on “social Darwinism and Christianity. And indeed philosophical ethics, dealing with the behavior of society, became the basis of McClure's muckraking ideology.”¹⁰¹

3. One of *McClure's* favorite contributors, Jacob Riis, would make history as the father of photojournalism. His book of simple photographs depicting the squalor of the slums, *How the Other Half Lives*, became an international bestseller. But Riis was a photographer only by hobby. His work as a police reporter is what earned him the friendship of Teddy Roosevelt and the trust of the city. Unarmed, Riis would walk the alleys of New York's infamous “Mulberry Bend,” then the most dangerous spot on Earth, and write about the things he saw: the sickness, the crime, the degrading poverty of immigrant life in the slums. In his autobiography, *The Making of an American*, Riis makes clear that his strategy was simple truth-telling as a simple Christian.

“... if I cannot wield lance and sword as the king's men of old, I can wield the pen. It may be that in the providence of God the shedding of ink in the cause of right shall set the world farther ahead in our day than the blood-letting of all the ages past. ... Children of God are we! that is our challenge to the slum, and on earth we shall claim yet our heritage of light.”¹⁰²

4. Lew Wallace's *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, published in 1880 by Harper and Brothers, quickly became a best-seller, with sales surpassing even those of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Though steeped in biblical references, and in spite of its title, the narrative avoids placing Christ at the dramatic center. Instead, it is a conversion story that takes place in the ancient world using background events in the life of Jesus. At heart a tale of revenge and forgiveness, *Ben Hur* would later be described as "the most influential book of the nineteenth century."¹⁰³

5. Finally, one could easily assemble hundreds of artistic (if somewhat didactic) religious novels that were specifically designed to impact the larger culture of nineteenth century America. Indeed, the work has already been done: one contemporary publisher, Lamplighter Books, catalogues over 200 of these titles available for sale in new, hand-bound editions. Such a collection from the twentieth century would be far more difficult to create.¹⁰⁴

Stories from the Twentieth Century

By contrast, the twentieth century American church seems to have abandoned such targeted projects altogether. It's not that evangelicals weren't writing and reporting and making movies; but that they were making them primarily for themselves, not the culture. That is, most of their artistic storytelling, like the "Christian film" category of today, targeted an audience already receptive to the gospel. Yes, certain stories have broken out of the evangelical box (*The Shack*, for instance, and the *Left Behind* series), but these represent exceptions rather than a trend, a conclusion supported by the fact both books made the jump to a larger readership by first gathering an audience among evangelicals.

In any event, the point is not that the twentieth century did not produce American evangelical writers and filmmakers who tried to impact the culture, but rather that the church as a whole did not significantly value these attempts.

In *A Creative Church: The Arts and a Century of Renewal*, Todd Smith portrays “the growing inclusion of the arts in American Christianity in the twentieth century”¹⁰⁵ as a sort of modern renewal movement. While this may be a valid perspective, what seems clear from his analysis is that the church’s gain came at the expense of the wider culture’s loss. After Scopes, American evangelicals had taken their ball and gone home, which meant more fun in their own back yard but fewer players involved in the national league of storytellers. Interestingly, Smith’s chapter-by-chapter analysis includes Theater, Music, Visual Arts, Dance, and notes on the intersection of Theology, Education, and the Arts, but no discussion of journalism, fiction, or the cinema. Perhaps evangelicals did not trust the fickle, formidable power of the narrative arts which had, after all, so frequently been used to mock them.

The Christ of the Passion

Whatever the reason, it was into this twentieth century backdrop of cultural separation—the sacred opposing the secular, and vice versa—that, in 2004, Mel Gibson released *The Passion of the Christ*, simultaneously astounding secular critics and amazing evangelical consumers.

Hostile critics and cultural elitists disparaged the film before it had even been seen. In an article published by Purdue University Press, for instance, one scholar found fault with Gibson’s directorial vision, comparing its ideology to that of a suicide bomber, only admitting on the last page that he had never seen the film and never would.¹⁰⁶

Even those who lauded the film tended to do so with loud disclaimers. “*The Passion of the Christ* is soaked in blood,” reviewer Richard Alleva warned on March 12, 2004. Blood “courses across the screen, forms puddles in cobblestone courtyards, drenches the torture implements that shed it, soaks garments, and renders the face of Jim Caviezel (who plays Jesus)

unrecognizable.”¹⁰⁷

In a 2004 *Primetime Live* interview with Diane Sawyer, Mel Gibson admitted that his film was intended to be brutal, so violent that viewers would find it difficult to watch.

“I wanted it to be shocking, and I also wanted it to be extreme. I wanted it to push the viewer over the edge. And it does that. I think it pushes one over the edge so that they see the enormity—the enormity of that sacrifice—to see that someone could endure all that and still come back with love and forgiveness even through extreme pain and suffering and ridicule.”¹⁰⁸

Herein lies the power of the film—and a principle of storytelling neither evangelicals nor secular scholars seem to have understood. The bloody brutality of the film is not gratuitous. It is a form of extreme and distressing honesty about the nature of reality. Gibson needed a torture large enough to highlight the magnitude of Christ’s love and forgiveness. The cleaned-up, Sunday school version of the crucifixion so often portrayed in PG dramatizations of the gospel is not a picture of reality, much less historical reality, but a picture of the church’s inability to frame ugly truths.

To most filmmakers, novelists, journalists, and playwrights, storytelling is about creating an emotional experience. Because emotion is triggered through relevance, effective stories strive to represent some form of reality as it truly is. This may require lying, exaggeration, or distortion in order to bring the emotional resonance into focus. But the goal is to create feelings that derive from a sense that, yes, *this is the way things are. This is what life is, for good or for ill.*

Inherit the Wind, a stageplay based loosely on the Scopes trial, is not historically or dramatically true, but only represents reality in the sense that it gives audiences a villain to be mocked and jeered in the public square. It highlights an extreme, and in so doing pushes its drama past the point of true relevance. Innocence is sacrificed for the sake of truth-telling, though in fact it is not the truth that is being presented but a partial truth—as porn depicts the

“reality” of biological sex but sacrifices virtually everything true about sex in the process.

For evangelicals, however, stories exist to communicate propositional truths. Our stories are supposed to extol moral virtues and communicate clear spiritual truths without defiling the audience. Consequently, Christian novels and dramas tend to tell lies that run the opposite direction. They highlight extremes of innocence, but in a context so devoid of reality that the innocence is barely discernible, much less inspiring. Christian storytelling of the twentieth century looked like snowmen standing in a field of glittering snowflakes—a lie that denied the truth about the world, and, worse, the truth about human nature. Evangelical stories, in other words, valued niceness over truth, and innocence over insight.

If real art is holding up a mirror to society, then both of these extremes represent funhouse mirrors. Secularists turn their funhouse mirror towards evangelicals, who do not recognize themselves in it because the mirror is a lie. But the lie delights those who want to see in the church an excuse to reject the propositional truths and gospel message that offends them.

Why accept a Jesus who looks like that?

For our part, American evangelicals are similarly holding up a mirror the world does not recognize. *Whose reality are you depicting with your June Cleaver ideals and goody-goody prudishness? Not mine!*

It should not be surprising that neither of these approaches ever fully engages the larger culture in a lasting way. When Jesus sent out the twelve disciples, he gave them instructions that ought to inform the church’s story methodology: “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”¹⁰⁹

Rather than choose one strategy—shrewdness or innocence—we are commanded to embrace both. Our stories should, like *The Passion of the Christ*, be tinged with the grime of

reality, presenting to the audience a broken world that any honest person can recognize. At the same time, we should highlight the importance of eternal absolutes in the face of such brokenness. In fact, it is only when a story bears the grime of reality that these absolutes are perceived as essential.

What the breakout stories of both the nineteenth and twentieth century have in common with Gibson's film is that before they present a theme of hope or renewal, they highlight the darkness and pain and brutality of life. They are shrewd in order to be innocent. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is bleak in its portrayal of the dehumanizing nature of slavery; that the journalism of *McClure's Magazine* was called 'muckraking' speaks for itself; Jacob Riis achieved worldwide fame not by photographing flowers, but the horrors of poverty; *Ben-Hur* is dramatically highlighted by its intense scenes of chariot-racing, and seems to have been inspired by Wallace's experiences as a Union General during the American Civil War. Furthermore, *The Shack* centers on the aftermath of a brutal crime, and the *Left Behind* series on a world governed by the antichrist.

I suspect it is the perceived incompatibility of innocence and shrewdness in the dramatic arts that prevents American evangelicals from admitting our cultural pacifism has left mainstream depictions of God almost entirely up to those who do not know him, or even know about him. Yes, we sometimes catch inspiring images. But mostly we have left God in the hands of angry sinners who, like the praetorians in Gibson's film, find it hilarious when the flesh is torn from his back.

What makes Gibson's film work is not merely the artistic excellence of its acting, set design, costuming and cinematography. It works in part because of its perceived realism, including the use of Latin and Aramaic dialogue. But more than this, it gives us a darkness

capable of contrasting against the light of Jesus.

This, I believe, is ultimately what offended secular scholars the most. They could have accepted a tortured and defeated Christ—if only he had lashed out and let the darkness take him with it. If only he hadn’t risen from the grave in the film’s closing seconds!

The horror and brutality of Christ’s suffering in *The Passion of the Christ* would be unendurable if it weren’t for the presence of the one who endures it. The blood and the pain are honest mirrors. They are the truth of crucifixion. They set the stage for trust between storyteller and audience by acknowledging our own experience of reality. *This! THIS is how life really is!* But they also highlight Christ’s innocence. Because at some point when watching *The Passion of the Christ* we can’t help but notice the grotesque injustice, the disproportionate unfairness, of how bad this suffering is when it happens to someone so good.

Secular storytellers—the honest ones—have tried to tell us that we American evangelicals are ugly in our religiousness and seclusion. And to some extent they are right. That is, they are right about us.

But they are wrong about Jesus, and that is ultimately why our seclusion has been so damaging. We were sent with clear instructions to be both shrewd and innocent. Instead, we were offended at the lies of people like H. L. Mencken, and instead of bearing his scorn with grim determination, or, better yet, with humble humor, we took our story—the story of Jesus—and we went home.

What we should have done was hold up an honest mirror to both the world and to ourselves. Yes, we are broken. But we are broken as the world is broken. We are misshapen not in the ways you secular storytellers say, but in far worse ways, for it is not our prudishness that makes us ugly but our hidden lusts. It is not our rites and sacraments that are foolish, but our

withholding from the world the story that gives them meaning.

We should learn from Gibson and Mencken. Even if what we learn is that to follow Christ means being mocked and scorned in public spaces, and that taking up our own cultural cross is the only way to make all things new.

Parallel Truth

The parallel worlds of Gibson's film are the main reason it speaks honestly into human life, regardless of our worldview or faith. The world is gritty and cruel; yet innocence and goodness may be found within it.

This is the paradox of art; it is the central technique of truth-telling from which every application of parallelism draws its power. To reveal something true about life, the artist presents an alternate vision that somehow communicates the co-existence of distinct and opposing realities.

Irony, for instance, is the loading of a situation or symbol or event with opposite meanings, so that we are simultaneously inspired in conflicting but compatible emotions. An ending that is "bittersweet" is ironic because it resolves in a way that is both happy and sad. Is it possible to be happy and sad in the same moment? Yes, of course. Otherwise we would not be able to feel the power of the bittersweet ending. More importantly, "bittersweet" is a snapshot of life. Reality is a mixture, and that mixture is felt most powerfully in the paradoxical convergence of its extremes.

Or take **juxtaposition**, the technique of setting two unrelated things side-by-side in order to imply a connection. Advertisers often use juxtaposition to make claims that would be illegal if stated as a fact: this beer makes you young and fit, these cookies will help you lose weight, this

streaming service will ensure you find the ideal spouse.

At the heart of every great truth stands a paradox. Leonard Sweet goes so far as to say that “Orthodoxy is parodoxy.”¹¹⁰ But often these paradoxes are hidden in ways that require the insight and metaphorical vision of the artist to reveal. Psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist suggests that these paradoxes are hard-wired into the parallel left-right hemispheres of our brains.

... there are needs, drives, or tendencies, which, while equally fundamental, are also fundamentally incompatible: an essentially divisive drive to acquisition, power and manipulation, based on competition, which sets individual against individual, in the service of unitary survival; and an essentially cohesive drive towards co-operation, synergy and mutual benefit, based on collaboration, in the service of the survival of the group. ... Both of these drives or tendencies can serve us well, and each expresses an aspect of the human condition that goes right to the core.¹¹¹

Gerard Manley Hopkins said that, “The artificial part of poetry, perhaps we shall be right to say all artifice, reduces itself to the principle of parallelism.”¹¹²

Every great storyteller seems to wrestle with this quirk of reality. I would go so far as to say that it is only in the aftermath of this wrestling that one’s artistic voice achieves maturity. Before their songs or paintings or movies or novels will resonate deeply with an audience, the musician or painter or writer must grapple with the angel of the Lord and not let go, must have their hip wrenched and their name changed from “Jacob the Deceiver” to “Israel the One Who Contends with God.”

This is the price of truth-telling: the storyteller *must not place his thumb on the scale*, must not take sides against the darkness and the Chaos, nor against the light and the Cosmos, but must speak or sing or write or paint fairly that which is real and true. The only way to do this is to paint in complimentary colors; to perform in twin clefs the harmony as well as the melody; to write of the beauty of the world but also of its ugliness.

Because reality is bi-dimensional, Truth can only really be told in parallel. Thus matter and spirit mirror body and soul as Christ and the Church mirror Heaven and Earth.

We experience life in parallels: the formal and the dynamic, unity and diversity, form and freedom, the one and the many, and on and on. Great thinkers throughout history have wrestled with these parallels, asking, ‘Which one prevails in our reality?’ From God’s limitless perspective, two realities can fulfill, harmonize, and dance with each other because they are creations of the unlimited Being, namely, God himself.¹¹³

This is why the story that ends with a *deus ex machina* resolution treats its audience with contempt. Life isn’t like this, or at least cannot be depended on to be like this. That sometimes people experience a happy ending is not at question. What is at question is, What is the true nature of things? And how often do the gods emerge from a trapdoor to set things right just when things are at their worst? Perhaps it *has* happened. But it is not *what* happens.

Someone will say, “But consider Christ!”

To which I reply first that Christ did not set things right by the mechanism of imposed justice or outside agency but by submission to all that the forces of antagonism threw at him, and, second, that Christ is the *Deus in machina*. He is the God who *enters* the machine, not the god who emerges from it.

In graduate school my mentor, James Gunn, used to say, “The hero must be the method of his own salvation.” As a young Christian, this annoyed me. Did he not know that Christ is the only moderator capable of effecting our salvation? I knew of course that Gunn was using the word salvation in a story sense. He spoke of resolution, not redemption.

What most irritated me was that I knew he was right but could not at first formulate why, or how that idea might fit within a Christian worldview.

Eventually I saw what should have been obvious all along, that fictional characters are

not real people, and, furthermore, that protagonists are not even meant to *represent* real people. Instead, a protagonist's main function is to embody an ideal, to demonstrate the sort of "class of experience" we encounter in real life when principle and power collide.

This is why the Hero must effect his own rescue at the climax. If Truth cannot stand on its own two feet, then it is not worth pursuing. If Forgiveness is really better than Revenge, why should the protagonist who embodies it need to be rescued by a squad of Marines? Or again, if Love is really stronger than Hatred and Selfishness, why must it depend upon someone else for its salvation?

No. It is only when Truth prevails *in spite* of its earthly impotence that we see truth clearly revealed. When Forgiveness has nothing going for it but its own nature—when nothing about forgiveness makes sense, but the helpless victim of a story forgives her oppressor anyway—then we recognize the truth-in-parallel of an honest storyteller. When Love remains nailed to a cross and refuses the injunction to "save himself," only then has the hero become the method of his own salvation, and perhaps that of the audience as well.

Great stories thus employ techniques of parallelism to express the parallel nature of truth in reality. But notice: what they align in parallel are actually opposites in spectrum. The things running side-by-side in a story (joy/sorrow, life/death, truth/falsehood, light/darkness) are polar opposites harmonized through tension. But instead of separating, they run together like railroad tracks.

The vital power of an imaginative work demands a diversity within its unity; and the stronger the diversity, the more massive the unity.¹¹⁴

Dramatically speaking, opposites attract. And it is the tension found in this simultaneous attraction and opposition that makes a story interesting, because we in the audience are always

off-balance and internally looking for a sense of resolution between the two. Which will win out, the love between Romeo and Juliet or the hatred of their feuding families? Will Jekyll or Hyde prevail? Can humans control nature, or will the chaos inherent in reality spring a T-Rex from its Jurassic Park cage? Might life be beautiful even in death? Could cancer be an agent of healing? What if someone told you that an electric chair once set them free? How about a cross?

The interesting thing about each of these is that they seem to be models of *logos*, of bringing the opposites together in a way that doesn't just harmonize them but produces parallel distinctions. In dying, Romeo and Juliet are at last joined together, and so are their families—thus striking parallel notes of joy and sorrow. Humans may indeed control genetics, but not the genetic byproducts of their creation; the majesty of Hammond's island theme park is transformed into a place where past and future are juxtaposed, where wonder and horror co-exist.

It turns out that the world we live in is a *Jurassic Park* reality of parallel opposition. Is it any wonder that these parallels are found all through human history, encoded into our best stories and artwork?¹¹⁵ Doesn't it make sense that they would also be embedded structurally into the Bible?

I begin to suspect that the Story of Stories was designed to reveal this to us. Scripture whispers in the very structure of its narratives that we live in a place of twin realities—a place of matter and of spirit, of life and of death, of chaos and of cosmos.

Heaven and earth are pulling us in opposite yet parallel directions.

Only on the horizon of God will those infinite tracks converge.

Part II

God's Story

7

The Storyteller's Parable

THE LANGUAGE OF TRUTH

In graduate school I signed up for a class called “Introduction to Old English.” Old English in this case was not merely olde, but *unornlic Englisc*—a linguistic relic that predates Chaucer and Shakespeare.

Most of this dead language’s surviving documents are pieces of the New Testament that were originally hand-copied by monks. Our class homework was typically to translate some very Germanic-looking passage from the gospels into modern English. As a new Christian, I found this process both tedious and fascinating. I eventually dropped the class, but for the few weeks I was enrolled I did feel a strange connection to history through the text.

One class period we spent most of our time reading through Mark 4:1-25. This part of Mark’s gospel focuses on the Parable of the Sower and its subsequent explanation, as well as a short passage labeled in the NIV, “A Lamp on a Stand.”

At the end of the translation process, a student raised her hand and asked, “Birds? Soil? Roots? What does this *mean*? ”

We were seated at the outside of a square of tables facing the center, so we could all see each other’s faces. I remember thinking that several people looked very confused.

The professor, who sat on my immediate left, pointed not at me, but at the student to my right. “What do *you* think it means?” he asked.

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“And you?” The professor asked of the next student. “What do *you* think it means?”

“I don’t really know either.”

One by one he went around the room, pointing and asking the same question of every student except me. I’m introverted enough I didn’t really mind, but after a dozen or so clueless responses I was fascinated.

We had just read not only the parable, but Christ’s explanation of what it meant. How could anyone in the room *not* know its meaning? We had just translated a very clear explanation of a very simple concept. The seed was the Word, the Sower was Jesus, the four types of soil were four conditions of the human heart that responded to Him in four different ways. It wasn’t difficult.

Was it?

After the professor asked the last student (though still not me), and received a final baffled shrug, the student who had first raised her hand said again, “So what *does* it mean?”

Our teacher shook his head. “I have no idea.”

This got a laugh from the class, but I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Was it possible I had just witnessed the parable playing itself out in a college classroom, the “birds of the air” snatching away understanding in spite of the fact the clear meaning of the story lay written out in modern English right in front of us—in our own handwriting?

To really understand what’s going on in this passage, it is helpful to picture the way this story must have played out when Jesus originally told it. Put yourself in the place of a local, someone from Capernaum who has heard rumors of strange healings and even stranger teachings.

A holy man who works on the sabbath? A rabbi who takes students from the ranks of fishermen and zealots and tax collectors? A human who commands demons and denounces the temple elders?

Who wouldn't want to hear from such a man, if only as an oddity?

So you trudge down the coast of the Sea of Galilee and gather with the crowd that has collected in the cove. Maybe you played here as a child and recall shouting *Hellooo!* at the half-bowl of sloping earth just to hear your own voice's effortless rebound.

Here there is plenty of room, and you will not need to get your feet wet in order to catch the master's words. The rabbi—Jesus of Nazareth—has already pushed off from shore and is steadying himself on the raised stern as two fisherman lift their oars dripping from the water. The thump of wet wood against dry is strangely magnified, almost an introduction, and the voices of those around you subside. For just a moment there is only the sound of the lapping waves.

“Listen!” the rabbi says at last—as if anyone were *not* listening. “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.”

A farmer? Seed? Birds? So he is telling a story, yes? But not one from the scriptures. At least, not a story you've ever heard before. And does the farmer have a name?

“Some fell on rocky places,” this Jesus fellow continues, “where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants, so that they did not bear grain.”

You may not be a farmer, but this is no surprise. Everyone knows that bad soil means a bad crop. *Sounds like this farmer doesn't know his own business!*

“Still other seed,” the rabbi says, one hand cupped over his eyes, “fell on good soil. It came up, grew and produced a crop, multiplying thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times.”

He stares out at the crowd for a long moment as if waiting for a response. Instead there is just silence—the crowd waiting him out.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” he says and sits down.

A few minutes later a handful of young men—his disciples, presumably—splash out in the shallow waters to stand waist deep around the boat. They are talking, but with their voices too low to be heard.

It is a long time before Jesus stands again to speak, and this time the story is about weeds planted by a farmer’s enemy. And something about a mustard tree and a woman mixing yeast into dough. Then he motions to the two men with oars and they maneuver the boat back to shore and the rabbi heads into town, trailing curiosity.

You shrug at a man who holds his hands out palm-up, as if begging for answers. “Why look at me?” you ask. “Do I look like a rabbi?”

The cove is filled with the sound of lapping waves and the play of sunlight on water as you turn back toward Capernaum. *What was that? What did it mean? Did I miss something? Surely there must be more!*

A Lamp on a Stand

There is more, of course, but only the disciples—those who got wet crowding his boat¹¹⁶—were privy to the meaning of these parables.

This fact is particularly challenging when we read how he unpacked the meaning of the Parable of the Sower. His explanations are sometimes as loaded with implication as the stories he

is unpacking

When asked why he speaks in parables, he gives a long answer that 1) points to the new covenant, and 2) references a contextually ironic verse from Isaiah, and 3) explains the parallels of the sower story with almost childlike simplicity, and 4) adds a question in the form of a metaphor that both invites and obfuscates, and 5) commands a response with conditions for both acceptance and rejection.

None of this is what we expect, and all of it is consistently misunderstood in the Evangelical community. As theologian Leonard Sweet points out: “The church’s failure to tell stories in a culture that talks in stories is a story in and of itself.”¹¹⁷

Our lack of story fluency has made it difficult for us to glean contextual significance from the parables, and our oversimplification of the New Testament as a collection of precepts and propositions has blinded us to the fact that the new covenant is about more than just forgiveness (as important as forgiveness is). It is also about God teaching us personally and individually—God to human, Spirit to flesh—by writing his law on the heart and on the mind.¹¹⁸ But *how* he does that is perhaps even more unexpected than the fact that he is willing to do it.

The Parable of the Sower was not meant to be understood quickly or easily. It was not meant to be interpreted through the use of pure human reason. It was designed to require a dialogue between storyteller and audience. “The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you,” Jesus told his disciples. “But to those on the outside—” This is an either/or situation. You either have access to the secret of the kingdom or you are outside the kingdom. Anyone who wants to know what the parable means must either ask God about it or remain puzzled. There is no third option. There is no figuring it out. No one understands it on their own. And as Jesus asks us in verse 13, if you do not understand the Parable of the Sower, how will you understand any

of his parables?

This doesn't mean that the parable has no effect on those who are outside looking in. On the contrary, the point of speaking in parables is that it provokes curiosity while respecting and affirming self-determination. When Jesus quotes Isaiah, he is not pronouncing judgment but holding up a mirror to the human heart—just as the Parable of the Sower predicts. It is your spiritual condition which determines how you respond to his parables. The form of the parable provides an exit door for those unwilling to take the ride.

‘they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!’¹¹⁹

Here Jesus is quoting Isaiah's vision in which the prophet sees, “the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted.” Around him the seraphs call to one another, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”¹²⁰ John's gospel tells us that in this heavenly commissioning of coals and creatures and riddles, Isaiah “saw Jesus' glory and spoke about him.”¹²¹ In other words, the incarnate Jesus is quoting Isaiah who is quoting Jesus. Not only is Jesus the same, his message is the same: those on the outside are allowed to misunderstand if they prefer ignorance to repentance. They *may* (not must) see but not perceive. They *may* (not must) hear but not understand. They are allowed to close their minds as they have closed their hearts.

The field is full of Easter eggs and Christ has posted a sign: FREE FOR THE ASKING! But you must ask. He will not drag you into the field. Nor will you find the eggs without his help—even if you care to look.

But if you ask, there is no end to the colorful treasure you will receive. And when you receive it, you will be shocked at how clear and obvious it suddenly seems: *The farmer sows the*

*word. Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.*¹²²

Why then does Jesus speak in parables?

It is important we not assume that we now have the answer. Even after explaining the entire parable, Jesus is not done answering this question.

Why do I speak in parables? For the same reason you put a lamp on a stand.

The metaphor of the lampstand is deeply connected to everything that is happening between Jesus and the disciples; it is the ultimate answer to their question, and one we have yet to fully recognize. Instead of a simple answer, Jesus responds with a simple question. Why do you put a lamp on a stand?

Answer: to make its light go farther.

The parable is not the message but the mechanism. It is not the lamp but the stand. The explanation Jesus gave to his disciples is the lamp. The parable everyone heard is a way of magnifying the light.¹²³

Movie theaters operate on this principle. House lights are placed high on the walls or in the ceiling. Those safety lights that illuminate the aisles are always fixed a foot or two off the floor.

On a trip to Haiti I once stayed in a house on the side of a mountain. One morning before sunrise I saw, across the valley behind the house, a tiny light bobbing along in the black silhouette of the far peak. When I asked what the light was, my host replied that it was a single candle held aloft by an old woman walking to market miles away.

The implications of the lampstand are extremely counterintuitive to anyone enmeshed in church tradition. We're used to the assumption that clarity of message is the pinnacle of both

expository preaching and storytelling. Nothing warms our hearts like an old-fashioned sermon punctuated in bullet-points.

When a church is fed only points and propositions, rules and answers, it's like a body nourished on husks and shells. Without propositions, it's like trying to stand up without a skeleton ... but propositions and principles come from the stories, not stories from the propositions.¹²⁴

An unbiased review of the methods Jesus used during his earthly ministry should make us question our propositional paradigms. The church is not using Jesus' approach but its opposite. We read what he did and then go and do otherwise. Both our tract-based, four-spiritual laws approach to evangelism, and our deductive, catechismal sermons, expressly rely on a method Christ compared to putting one's light under a bushel. Deductive sermons do not make the light go farther; they snuff it out.

Jesus rarely explained himself to anyone except his disciples. To everyone else—to “everyone on the outside,” including those who came to him because they were genuinely curious—he told weird stories that didn’t make sense and weren’t packaged with a summarizing explanation. To those who were not sold-out followers, including many who sat in church every Sunday and acted like good, God-fearing patriots, he spoke in riddles and puzzles and parallel narratives. Even the Sermon on the Mount, which begins with a series of general statements (the beatitudes) and proceeds through a list of moral laws, relies heavily on short parables and metaphors that strain our powers of deduction to the breaking point—and then ends in a story. This sermon, the height of Christ’s expository preaching, overflows with Old Testament references and real-life implications left open to interpretation: *You are salt. Cut off your hand. Do not announce it with trumpets. Store up treasures in heaven. The eye is the lamp of the body. Consider the lilies. First take the plank out of your own eye. Knock and the door will be opened.*

Enter through the narrow gate. They are wolves in sheep's clothing. Nor is all of this disconnected from the story in which the Sermon on the mount appears:

Matthew is not giving an argument like Paul; he is telling a story, so he might not come out and explicitly say what he is trying to communicate. In the words of one scholar, there is a difference between “direct definition” and “indirect presentation” within a narrative.¹²⁵

Not only did Jesus speak in parables to his followers, he spoke this way to his friends. Even his inner circle rarely got an explanation unless they asked for one. This characteristic of Jesus’ discipleship is so foreign to our way of thinking that we don’t recognize it in the gospels, though it’s clear as tap water when you read them as stories.

The principle is this: to make any message go farther, reach more people, last longer in their minds, and do more good in terms of changing their modes of thinking and their behavior, you must communicate in their native language. And in every culture from the dawn of creation, that language, for humans, is not logic but Story.

Stories are what made the past, and stories are what will make the future. ... How do you navigate a world of constant turbulence, negotiate cascading avalanches of information and chicanes of alternative facts and fake news? You use the GPS of narrative.¹²⁶

In a 2019 interview with tech guru Lex Fridman, Elon Musk, the modern embodiment of Iron Man, gave a fascinating justification for hard-wiring supercomputers to the human brain. Musk’s Neuralink corporation aims to provide real-time thought-mapping that will make integrated artificial intelligence a reality in the near future, in part because, according to Musk, we have no hope of matching the digital intelligences that are coming, so why not join them? Here’s how he explains the human brain:

We’ve got a monkey brain with a computer stuck on it. That’s the

human brain. And a lot of our impulses are driven by the monkey brain. And the computer, the cortex, is constantly trying to make the monkey brain happy. It's not the cortex that's steering the monkey brain; it's the monkey brain steering the cortex. ... It seems like, surely the really smart thing should control the dumb thing, but actually the dumb thing controls the smart thing.¹²⁷

As offensive as this statement may seem, it aligns with Paul's view of human nature: "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace."¹²⁸ But where Musk offers no escape from the tyranny of the monkey brain, Paul suggests there is a force powerful enough to wrestle away control of the cortex from the limbic system. One might say that *the cortex controlled by the monkey brain is death, but the cortex controlled by the Spirit is life and peace*. But however you phrase it, the point is that your mind is not actually in control. It is being controlled, either by your limbic system—your emotions and desires for food, sex, sleep, comfort, etc—or by the Spirit of God.

In other words, we are not driven by reason. We're driven by emotion and metaphor and, in our best moments, by spiritual desperation—all of which are the domain of Story.

This is why it is largely ineffective to build evangelistic and liturgical practices on the illusion of clear thinking. We aren't clear thinkers, even in our best moments. We are story thinkers, which is something profoundly different.

The power of the Word to move people from rote-religion to full-life immersion is not in the words themselves. It's in the images, the stories, the music of Scripture. ... Since the mind is made of metaphors (remember, we dream in pictures, not text), the greatest power over others is the power held by those who choose the metaphors.¹²⁹

We are driven by moving metaphors: the stories we hear, the stories we identify with, and, most of all, the stories we choose to live. We derive our identity from Story. But life-giving stories are rarely clear. Instead, the stories that truly shape us are the ones that mirror our earthly,

sweat-stained approximations of truth we call life experience.

We are shaped by pyramid stories.

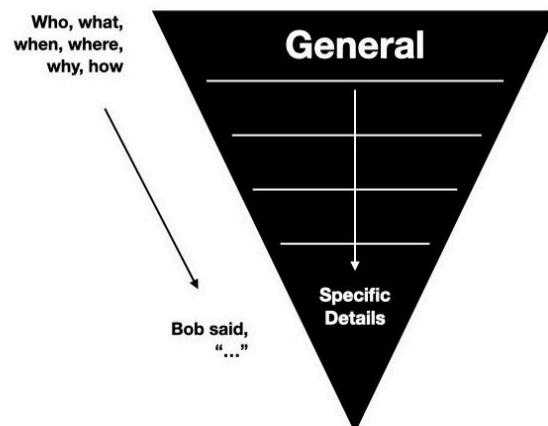
If Anyone has Ears

Journalists sometimes refer to stories as being shaped either as pyramids or upside-down pyramids.

Hard news stories use an inverted pyramid structure. They begin with the basic details of a story (who, what, when, where, why, and how) and work towards greater specificity as the story unfolds. First we learn that the Hindenburg airship exploded on May 6, 1937 while attempting to land at Lakehurst Naval Air Station in New Jersey. Later we are given details about the presumed cause of the explosion, and only near the end do specific quotes from witnesses appear. The story begins with an overview and ends with a small fragment of the bigger picture. Such news is considered *deductive* because it works from general narration to specific details.

All is clearly stated:
Hard news, Propaganda, Lectures, Speeches

Deductive Structure



Inverted pyramid structure is not just the preferred structure of journalists. It's also favored by preachers and professors and propagandists. Why? Because a deductive format allows the storyteller to select whatever evidence or proof is needed to support their main point. This is how news stories are slanted—with carefully selected facts. Propaganda is built on facts, not lies.

This is also the main reason college writing courses tend to focus on the five paragraph essay. An introduction followed by three increasingly powerful proofs and a conclusion is simple but effective training in the power of deductive persuasion. Rather than making us more aware of how such stories can be twisted, however, these assignments may only strengthen our perception that deductive storytelling is normal. Our blinding paradigms may result from the educational assumption that learning to think in this particular way is necessary to arrive at truth—that all storytelling is deductive.

Brian Anse Patrick explains how inverted pyramids are used in journalism:

In practice, the story content is selected to fit the lead rather than the other way around. It is a style or recipe that lends itself to industrial hack writing, which is a dietary staple both in propaganda and journalism. That many prominent propagandists have risen up from the ranks of journalists attests to the indispensability of the news format in controlling the flow of information.¹³⁰

It's one thing to say that Baghdad Bob selected his content to fit his leads. It's perhaps not much different to say that CNN or *The New York Times* does it too. But preachers?

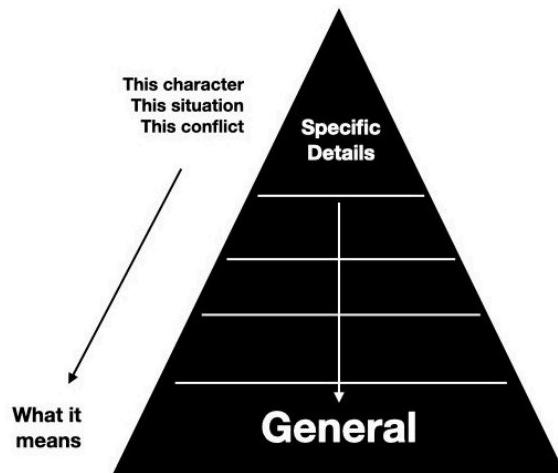
Rather than present a deductive list of proofs that American Evangelical services are dominated by inverted pyramid sermons, I will defer instead to the reader's personal experience and a single quote from a theologian. Last time you were at church, was the sermon essentially bullet points proving a clearly articulated concept from the Bible? Were you, perhaps, the one

preaching it? (And if you were, would your seminary professors have approved?)

A deductive sermon appeals to the mind but not the heart. It expresses faith not in felt terms or felt needs but in nuggets for the noggin.¹³¹

In short, we may be so indoctrinated in the dogma of deduction that we have trouble seeing this sort of reasoning as unreasonable. We certainly don't imagine that deductive storytelling is a *problem*.

The alternative is of course a bit more complicated than flipping our story pyramids over so that they are no longer balancing on a single point. Still, moving from deductive to inductive is a good place to start.



Inductive Structure

Specifics lead to generalities:
Features, Fables, Morality Tales

The inductive, right-side-up pyramid structure is useful because it begins with specifics and moves towards the general. This is how we live life. We do not begin in the realm of general principles (“Never steal, young man,”) but in the particularities of here and now, the soil and sky and sandwiches of daily experience where *this moment I am hungry and no one is looking and*

what's the big deal, anyway? Eventually such experiences, and their consequences, may lead to a resolution that one should never steal.

Aesop's fables are examples of inductive, pyramidal stories. They begin with specific if fanciful situations and conclude with a clearly stated moral. After the fox fails to secure a delicious-looking bunch of grapes he concludes that, "They're probably sour anyway," and walks away. The storyteller then tells us the moral: *it is easy to despise what you cannot have.*

It is a well-known story. But does its last line seem a bit on the nose? A touch patronizing or even preachy?

Such stories tend to be short—more anecdotes than stories—for exactly this reason. A brief illustration can make the message or moral easier to understand and more entertaining, but a long story implicitly promises something besides an easy, microwave interpretation. This is probably one reason Jesus kept his inductive parables short.

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.
You cannot serve both God and Money.¹³²

Inductive storytelling is flawed because, though it more closely resembles how we process life than does deductive storytelling, it departs from reality by arriving at the conclusion for us. Rather than invite the audience to search for the moral or general principle hidden in the events of the story, an inductive story hits us between the eyes with it. Unlike in life, an inductively-presented moral can't be missed.

Here again is a story problem we Evangelicals often fail to understand. If experience is the best teacher, the best way a story can teach me anything is to allow me to process its conclusion for myself. Were I teaching a boy how to drive nails, I could tell him a dozen times that he was holding the nail wrong. But he probably won't learn the lesson until he bangs a

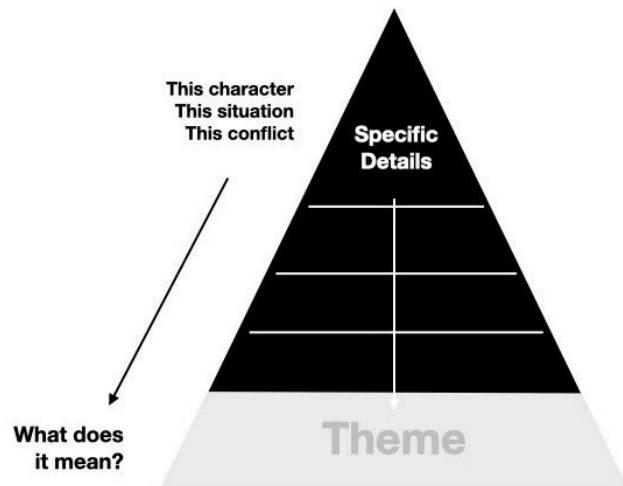
finger.

In the church our stories sometimes try to apply this principle, but since we don't trust the audience to arrive at acceptable conclusions we tend to package the truth, Aesop-style, inside an obvious concluding moral. At best we ask the audience to hold out their fingers for an instructive bashing. Whatever we end up hitting, it isn't their fingers.

Great storytellers don't apply the hammer themselves. They give the hammer and the nail to the audience and wait for the inevitable. Why?

Because in life the general principle is never precisely known in the moment. Instead, it is inferred from details that point to a *most likely* explanation. When you hear rumors at the office, you draw conclusions based on what you know about those passing along information. When you try to help a child through some troubling phase, you draw conclusions based on their history, habits, and personality. When you sense a friendship is growing cold, you may retrace your past interactions in your memory looking for clues about what caused the rift.

Life is not packaged into neat containers. It does not come to us labeled with biblical references and Socratic virtues. These are only ever understood contextually. Which means that we arrive at them through an *abductive* process.



Abductive Structure

Specifics lead to implications:
Parables, Novels, Movies

Abductive storytelling begins in the specific and ends just short of the general. It invites an audience to hypothesize some principle that is never directly stated. Like the Great Pyramid at Giza, its base is concealed and its Inner Chamber is hidden.

Because its limits mirror those we encounter in life, it has enormous power to move. It doesn't just entertain. It conceals, preserves, and reveals layers of meaning that are not apparent on the surface. But because it never arrives at a clear synthesizing general principle, an abductive story risks being misunderstood. Just as Jesus risked being misunderstood when he told parables to crowds who would never hear his detailed explanations.

Consider carefully what you hear

As lampstands, the long-form parables of Jesus are uniquely abductive. “For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the

open.”¹³³

His stories are rich with hidden meaning that was intended to be understood. But understanding comes with a price. The hidden things will be *disclosed*, not discovered. Insight is available, but must be sought. True revelation must be received.

Furthermore, we are not just invited to ponder their deeper significance over time; we are commanded to consider carefully what we hear. For with the measure we use—teaspoon, trowel, or truck—it will be measured back to us.¹³⁴

In the remainder of this book, therefore, we will consider carefully the story of the Bible, which is really the story of Jesus, using the measure of Story. Characterization, plot, context, theme, and voice will be our egg-detectors and our treasure chests. There is, however, one condition upon which this sort of exploration depends.

In his groundbreaking book on post-critical theory, Michael Polanyi writes:

Only a Christian who stands in the service of his faith can understand Christian theology and only he can enter into the religious meaning of the Bible.¹³⁵

The price of admission is not mastery of the English language or even mastery of the language of Story, but a willingness to leave behind any modern notions of personal objectivity. None of us stands above the fray. To enter God’s story one must be willing to enter it fully and on its own terms. To find a place in the story of Jesus we must have the humility to submit to it.

Biblical scholarship is heavily dominated by a critical approach that assumes a distanced, 10,000 foot view far above the text. Faith thus becomes an object of scrutiny rather than a lens through which scripture is interpreted. This position shapes the sorts of theories and explanations scholars entertain as plausible. For instance, some scholars have assumed that repeated plot points indicate scribal error rather than deliberate narrative or structural meaning.

In order to understand the story, we must let it function as a story. We must begin by assuming that everything in the text is meaningful. This is especially true when viewing the Old Testament as an extended typological and metaphorical story arc that foreshadows the incarnate life of Christ. You cannot see Christ in the Old Testament if you will not see him in the New Testament. And you will not see him in the New Testament if your Old Testament is nothing more than a collection of interesting myths and scribal errors.¹³⁶

It is true that I begin with a bias—but so does the scholar-skeptic. I cannot escape the fact of my own faith, nor do I want to. I believe the story as written—in part because Jesus believed it. I accept as a starting place a Jesus hermeneutic that begins with his statement, ‘the Scripture cannot be broken.’

Those who approach the Bible from a position of skepticism are equally inhibited. Unbelief does not make one objective. If mere observation can affect the outcome in quantum physics, why is it difficult to believe that our starting assumptions may steer what we see in the scriptures? “No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”¹³⁷

The skeptic and the believer both begin subjectively. I am willing to admit my subjective starting point and its difficulties. I approach this particular mountain from the west. The skeptic attacks it from the east. Neither of us is favored with a bird’s eye view. I merely say that this mountain was created to be climbed, and climbed from the west. If you scale the other side you miss the truly spectacular views. The Bible was written as a religious text to a community of believers. In order to be understood fully it must be read in that light.

What follows is my attempt to throw off the limiting paradigms of five hundred years of textual vivisection in order to see the Bible as a story, as *the* story, of both humanity and of God, using the five common story elements nearly everyone understands.

8

The Voice of the Storyteller

VOICE

The storyteller-to-audience relationship depicted in the Bible is not the one we expect.

Even those who believe that God exists tend to think of Him as distant, a million miles away and seated on a throne of judgment beyond the stars. He is out there somewhere, counting the molecules or fueling the supernovas, but if He is aware of our existence at all it is only a disinterested, fact-based awareness that prioritizes recording our good and bad deeds. He may watch the unfolding of our lives, but only through a telescope, and only to keep score.

Perhaps we like that idea because it makes us more comfortable with our shortcomings. By conceptualizing the standard of perfection as abstract and remote, inhuman and unknowable, we remove from ourselves the obligation of obedience to what we do know and can experience.

This sort of sterilized, atmospheric deity is not the one depicted in scripture. Yes, He is often described as mysterious and transcendent, so far beyond human thought and material “likeness” that no image could accurately capture His essence. But this does not result in a gnostic contradiction between the earth-bound and the spiritual. The God of the Bible is relational. He is present in the everyday material circumstances of human life, so “with us” even in our suffering and confusion that nothing can separate us from Him.

Paul captured the unique both-and quality of this transcendent presence when describing God to the people of Athens.

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.¹³⁸

Notice the dual nature of this description, that God is not far off from anyone, and also that He wants to be found.

It follows that even though God is right there—just around the corner and waiting with held breath for his image-bearing children to “reach out for him”—that something has gotten in the way. He is the one waiting on us, not the other way around. He is the one who is close at hand; we are the ones who loiter uninterested a million miles away.

Jesus makes this point again and again. In fact, when he sends out his disciples, the message he tells them to deliver, in its entirety, is “The kingdom of heaven is near.”¹³⁹ And that nearness was to be demonstrated through healing the sick, raising the dead, cleansing the leprous, and driving out demons. All of these were signs of the bursting out of the goodness of God. His transcendent life would transcend the separation of heaven and earth. His unfelt “nearness” would become tangible “with-ness.”

Times and cultures have changed, but people were not very much different during the life of Jesus than we are today. They too had a very hard time believing that “The kingdom of heaven is near.”

This is probably one of the main reasons the gospels are filled with stories. The best way to ensure that an audience goes beyond understanding something rationally and owns it experientially is to package it in the vault of a good story. Some will miss what’s hidden inside,

especially at first, but those who eventually grasp it will be changed permanently by their internal process of vault-breaking.

It is important to understand that the stories the Bible is filled with are not primarily conceptual in nature; they are metaphorical. Kenneth E. Bailey goes so far as to call Jesus a “metaphorical theologian.”

A metaphor, however, is not an illustration of an idea; it is a mode of theological discourse. The metaphor does more than explain meaning, it creates meaning. *A parable is an extended metaphor* and as such is *not a delivery mechanism for an idea* but a house in which the reader/listener is invited to take up residence.¹⁴⁰

In other words, in the Bible God is not concerned primarily with the transmission of principles and concepts that can be lifted verse-by-verse from the page as if they were facts to be revealed on a game show. *Love is patient and kind, true or false? What is the last book of the New Testament? How many sons of Sceva were beaten by the evil spirit in Ephesus?*

American Evangelicals have gotten this point very wrong, and thereby missed something important about the nature of the biblical Storyteller.

As we saw in chapter seven, Jesus spoke in parables. In fact, to those on the outside, to the people who followed him for his miraculous signs and existential opposition to the elites of Jewish and Roman society, he *only* spoke in parables. Again, this was not a form of dismissal but of invitation. His parables were nets, a practical methodology for fishing for men.

On its face this is a significant revelation about the personality of the God of the Bible. He knows how to reach us, how to speak to us where we are. In so doing, He has taken the risk of revealing Himself as He is.

The voice of any storyteller is a revelation of their essential personality. It can be heard and understood through their storytelling, the dialogue they create, the conflicts they choose to

work within, the insights conveyed through their dramatic arcs and juxtapositions, etc.

In the same way, the personality of God may be understood by inference as a direct consequence of the choices he has made in sharing his story with humanity. Just as conferring free will to his creation must have required a massive risk on his part, so too was it risky to share his personality through the story arc of scripture.

He was bound to be misunderstood, after all. Yet even knowing that his motives would be twisted and his actions mischaracterized, he chose to play the very long game of patient love, of nearness and with-ness, that would only begin to be fully understood when he assumed human form and lived out the story in front of us.

Such a demonstration would require more than facts and formulas. It would require extended metaphors, even chains of extended metaphors that would be layered one upon another like geological strata.

This is why Bailey must use a metaphor to explain the metaphorical nature of the parables. The stories Jesus told were each like a “house” that must be lived in to be fully understood. Each parable is not a one-window residence but a place of many windows, and each window has its own “true” view of the external world.

Anyone who has listened to more than a handful of sermons will recognize the truth of this. Ask ten different preachers to give a sermon on the same parable and you will find you are looking out of ten different windows. Some may have similar views of the mountains in the distance, but no two will be exactly alike. Remarkably, the more time and reflection each clergyman devotes to the parable, the more unique his or her sermon is likely to be.

But the strata of meaning found in Jesus’ life go much deeper than even the parables would seem to convey. Jesus didn’t just *tell* parables, he *lived* them. John remarks on this at the

close of his gospel:

Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.¹⁴¹

Notice that Jesus *did* many other things, he didn't just *say* many other things. Every recorded incident of his life, everything he did, was rich with layered meaning, which is why for over two thousand years preachers have unpacked not just the stories he *told* but the stories he *experienced*.

Because Jesus is the true source of all meaning—the ultimate “Sender” and Transcender—*meaning* followed him as if in a cloud, radiating out from him and trailing behind him like a fragrant aroma even after he moved on.

[Earth's] inhabitants had withdrawn the attention of their hearts from the true source of meaning and sought significance in the mere signifier. So meaning came among us: walked with us; ate with us; suffered with us.¹⁴²

It is easy to miss the significance of this, but his meaning-making is directly connected to the nature of his voice as the Storyteller.

The reason we miss the multivalent nature of Jesus' life and teaching is probably that we fail to place ourselves in a position to hear what he is really saying. Rather than sitting at his feet as disciples, we come to him as critics, perhaps even appreciative critics. Often we come as fans in search of another great moment in which the Pharisees are put in their place or our nasty neighbors are finally told off. So we bring our modern and post-modern presuppositions of evaluation, prepared to accept the good (*i.e.* what we approve of and agree with) and dismiss the outdated and unrealistic (*i.e.* anything that makes us uncomfortable or requires a significant change of behavior).

What we *don't* do is place ourselves in a position to receive from him directly, Teacher-to-student. We keep God in a faraway place behind His heavenly telescope, wreathed in the gauzy texture of hypotheses. We keep Him someplace where, though He can't do us very much good, neither can He do us any real harm.

We don't learn from Jesus because we don't go to Him in order to learn. We go to him, when we go to him at all, to evaluate. Though for that matter we generally *don't* go to Him. Instead, we go to a *safe* Jesus, a bobble-head Jesus, a Jesus meek and mild, a hair-parted-in-the-middle-and-sporting-sandaled-feet Jesus, a Jesus of a thirty-second cross and a ten-second descent into hell, a barista Jesus who just wants to offer a friendly word of advice.

The same is true, perhaps to a lesser extent, with how we approach the scriptures. We read for facts and for knowledge and sometimes for devotion, but rarely do we read for discipleship, to be ourselves transformed. Even though we suspect, quite rightly, that real transformation only ever comes as a result of hearing and resonating with the voice of God.

Bailey suggests that in order to understand Christ's metaphorical theology we must receive his parables with "authentic simplicity":

Simply stated, our task is to stand at the back of the audience around Jesus and listen to what he is saying to them. Only through that discipline can we discover what he is saying to any age, including our own.¹⁴³

In other words, we must come to him as disciples responding to his call to "follow me." We must set aside our pride and our dependance on human wisdom and our preconceptions and our traditions. Only when we do this, when we surrender the life we think we have, are we ready to receive him and receive from him.

This is not just a matter of imaginatively placing ourselves among the crowd listening to his parables, useful as that may be. Many among the crowds who heard Jesus teach went home

as spiritually impoverished as when they arrived. Even after his miraculous provision in feeding five thousand people with five barley loaves and two small fish,¹⁴⁴ for instance, the crowd was nonetheless offended when Jesus revealed their real motivation, that they were looking for handouts, not the “food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you.”¹⁴⁵ As soon as he described the work required to receive the “bread of God,”¹⁴⁶ they grumbled and went away.

The prerequisite for receiving *from* him is believing *in* Him. There is no other path to acquiring “the words of eternal life,” as Peter called them. Mere reading is not enough, nor is it enough to listen to sermons and podcasts (though these may be helpful in their own way). Even *The Big Book of Bible Knowledge*, if such a thing were to exist, could not light one’s path to real revelation.

These things may of course be used by God to train his people. But they are not substitutes for discipleship, for sitting at the feet of Jesus to be taught directly by him in a way that illuminates the scriptures and brings them to life. “My sheep listen to my voice,” he said. “I know them, and they follow me.”¹⁴⁷

These examples are types—semiotic flashes of Morse Code, if you will—that reveal the startling and unexpected arrival of a New Covenant through which the kingdom of heaven would manifest on earth.

The crowds that followed Jesus for free burgers and fries missed the significance of almost everything he said. Oh, they thought they understood him, at least until he seemed to intentionally drive them away by declaring that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood. But it is clear that even his disciples were generally befuddled¹⁴⁸ by much of what he said until they asked him privately for explanations.¹⁴⁹

We too have missed the significance of what is written, and we will continue to miss it if we are not willing to follow this same path of discipleship, of asking him privately for a revelation of what has been made public through the Scriptures.

It is not enough to stand imaginatively at the edge of the crowd when reading the gospels. At times we must position ourselves closer still, in the house of the Pharisee who treated Jesus disgracefully; in the boat with the disciples as a storm threatens their lives; in the courtyard with Peter as the rooster crows to remind us hauntingly of our own denials; in the sandals of Thomas who would not believe without seeing.

But of course it is not *seeing* that produces believing, but *hearing*. “Faith comes by hearing,” Paul tells us, “and hearing through the word of Christ.”¹⁵⁰

Nor is it enough to *physically* hear the words being spoken. He who has ears to hear must also *actually* hear. “Consider carefully what you hear,” Jesus said. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more.”¹⁵¹

We cannot hear what *will not* hear. Which means the starting point for transformation, for learning to recognize the voice of the Storyteller in one’s life, is recognition of one’s need.

John tells one story in particular that seems to embody the nature of spiritual transformation experienced by every disciple of Christ who responds to his voice.

It’s the story of a blind man who receives his sight, and if you are a true disciple of Jesus then this is your story too.

Tell Me So that I May Believe¹⁵²

It was going to be one of those dry summer scorchers. Even at sunrise Sam could already feel the day coming as a line of heat across his face. God was going to shove the whole world

into an oven.

Per usual, Pop and Josey had dropped him off at the corner by the filling station, but even the familiar aromas of motor fluid and donut batter fresh from the fryer seemed dampened by the rising heat. That day even the birdsong was muted, and being Sunday the Interstate was near silent.

Sam sat on the square of memory foam Mom had found for him and leaned against the concrete block wall of the station. He'd worn that spot smooth over the years. This was his place, his corner, a spot people called "ugly" because it faced the city vehicles lot instead of the old brownstone church planted caddy-corner on 5th and Main.

He preferred ugly. Pap said it added texture to the story. Patina was a good thing, maybe even a God thing. "Life sticks to you, Sam, like a soot that don't wash off. You got it all over you, and it pays, son. It pays."

So he would sit and tug heartstrings with his five-drachma smile and eyes the color of melting snow—whatever that looked like. Whenever a car dinged the tripwire bell he would turn his face to the fresh pilgrims and let his patina show: here sat a poor blind beggar, and whatever you could spare, coins or paper, it'd spend the same, and bless you for your trouble. Old Sam wouldn't harm nobody, and wasn't even old. Been broke down all his life. Just worn out now like one of those wrecks 'cross the street. Not so far from God that the good church folk wouldn't know him, but plenty far enough they couldn't see him.

Some were Sunday morning regulars killing two birds, gas and alms, on the way home to a roast in the oven. He recognized the Kittricks by the sound of their four kids bickering in the back of the family station wagon, heard the petty squall coming all the way from the corner. Some he knew by the smell of tobacco that spilled from opened doors, or the cloying sweetness

of Gucci Gold that meant Widow Spengler would be going to confession.

Others he knew by the sound of the engine. Tuuli Kuszczak's '78 Bronco suffered from a distinct mechanical wheeze. But Ms. Whelan's Cadillac purred; she always nudged it into the gas station five miles under the limit, prompting Sam to wonder for the thousandth time if a car could resent never being really used, if its eight cylinders were more curse than blessing in the long stretches between weekends as it slept its life away in her one-car garage.

That morning the traveling preacher arrived in a van—a big peacenik VW by the sound and smell of it. No weed in the air, just the scent of old pizza boxes and half a dozen young men singing as they tumbled out, sneakers squeaking on the warm asphalt: "*There is a Fountain Filled with Blood*".

"Hey, Pete, check this out."

"—*Drawn from Immanuel's veins*—"

They were coming nearer, voices fading as they caught sight of Sam.

He gave them a big GodBlessYou smile, ready to talk religion if that's what it took. Grace was the sound of paper money sliding into his wooden 'donations-whatever-you-can-spare' box.

A couple of guys in the back kept up the song like it was a soundtrack. "—*And sinners, plunged beneath that flood, Lose all their guilty stains*,—"

"What?"

"—*Lose all their guilty stains, /What?/ Lose all their guilty stains. And sinners plunged beneath that flood, Lose all their guilty stains!*" The song trailed away into cheerful laughter, then silence.

"Friend," someone said from farther back, probably the driver just coming around from

the other side of the van. “You know the way to the city pool?”

Sounds of feet scuffling, making way for the new voice.

Sam pointed right, past the pumps. “Just ‘round the corner on Main by the Post Office.”

Someone laughed, and Sam started to get uncomfortable. He could feel the presence of somebody standing above him, then stooping down. A moment later hands grasped his face. He started to protest, but the voice said, “This won’t hurt,” and Sam believed him. Then something like paste was slathered over his eyelids and Sam shoved the hands away.

“What are you doing?” He was angry now. He hadn’t done anything wrong. Why did some people have to be so cruel? They could see he was blind. This sort of thing wasn’t funny. It hadn’t been funny in grade school and it was less funny when grown-ass men—

“Pete,” the man said. “Go with him.”

Someone took his hands and hauled him to his feet. “Come on. Let’s get you some chlorine.”

They started singing again, following along like baby ducks, laughing and shoving each other the way young men do. “—*E’er since by faith I saw the stream, Thy flowing wounds supply*—”

“What?” Pete chorused.

“—*Redeeming love has been my theme, and shall be till I die!*”

“It’s gonna be okay, okay?” Pete said. “Reverend Lovejoy has a gift.”

Sam went along, not sure why, one hand clutching his donations box, the other tapping his cane. The guy next to him held his elbow, and Sam wished he wouldn’t but didn’t want to make trouble with so many guys surrounding him.

He smelled the pool half a block away. Heard the chainlink gate creak open. Shuffled up

to the edge and stopped, suddenly fearful they'd toss him in. But they were silent again. By now his face felt warm. Too warm, like something was wrong with his eyes. But of course there was. Always had been.

"Go ahead." Pete said. "You're three feet away. Shallow end."

Sam knelt on the hot concrete, knees protesting, and felt for the smooth tiles of the edge. He dipped one hand in the tepid water and brushed a little onto his face. His hand came way with something smooth clinging to it, something the texture of paint. Repeated the process with both hands as the feeling on his face increased.

The heat.

Was it heat? It was *like* heat, but different. Like sound but—

"There it is!" Pete said.

Sam splashed both hands in the water, scooping it up and tossing it onto his face, soaking his t-shirt and his hair and making little dribbles of water run down his back. "What did he do?" Sam shouted at nobody in particular. "What? WHAT!"

Behind him, the groupies all laughed like they'd been in on the joke and were just waiting for the punchline.

"Reverend Lovejoy has a gift," Pete said. "And he just gave it to you."

Sam leaned back, blinking, the brightness suddenly painful in a way he had never felt before. This was light. Sunlight. Sunlight on this part of the world in front of him. And this—*this*—was water. What water looked like. What sunlight on water looked like. What a pool looked like. What the world looked like. This was what *looking* looked like. Had it always been this way? So much around him, this close yet beyond his knowing?

And the young men—their voices now familiar because he was skilled at capturing the

timbre of a human voice even from a laugh—they weren't laughing now. Their faces were like—like what? Like eggs about to crack from the inside, maybe.

That one must be Pete. And that one with the stubble and the long sideburns must be Barty, the one who fancied himself a comedian. And that one—

"Come on," Pete said, tugging Sam's elbow. "Let's go tell him."

"He's moved the van already," someone said.

"Told us to meet him at the church."

"Then we'll go to the church," Pete said.

Standing now, Sam pulled his arm away. "Think I'll just stay here awhile."

Pete shrugged. "Suit yourself."

The young men wandered off, one of them striking up a new hymn Sam barely noticed. He did not want to go to the church, even if he could not admit to himself why. But the sun was shining and the shadows it cast through the trees were mesmerizing.

Alone, he walked to the adjacent park, still tapping the ground with his cane out of habit and because he did not want to leave it behind and most of all because he needed something familiar to hold onto and to do. He moved as if in a dream, drawn to the whisper of leaves that seemed to float in the air overhead, and he sat at a picnic table and stared.

This was what trees looked like. What leaves looked like. What the sun moving between trees *did* to the grass. It was a kind of magic. Light and leaf, light and water. The trees had a patina of their own. The pool had a patina. Nature wasn't just natural. It was supernatural. How had he never known this? Did everyone else know this? Was this something that must be seen to be understood? Or was it one of those things that receded the longer you lived with it, like the sound of a passing train when your house stood next to the tracks?

The sound of people moving in the church parking lot drew him out of his reverie. He must have been staring a long time. Still he did not move until the lot emptied. He didn't want a bunch of questions, a lot of people poking at him like something they found alongside the road.

When the coast was clear he tap-tap-tapped down the sidewalk and across the intersection, not even bothering with the crosswalk button, and then up the tilting concrete of the front steps and through the wooden arch of the front door.

Inside, light poured through the stained glass windows, and Sam saw suddenly why people liked to come to church. It wasn't for the smells, certainly, which consisted mostly of outworn carpet and candle wax and furniture polish all mixed together with the aroma of cheap wine.

He tiptoed through the narthex and into the chapel. The contrast between dark and light caught his breath. Shafts of light so thick with dust you could tie a rope to them, and in all the colors, though he couldn't name them one from another. What made red red, after all? He would have to ask Josey. Behind the sunlight there were dark patches, beside the altar and under the frame of the door in the back and especially around the pulpit. So much darkness. So many shadows. Probably that's what made the light stand out, thinned even as it was by the colorful glass.

He walked the center aisle, tapping the carpet with his cane and brushing the backs of pews with the fingers of his left hand. How long had it been? Nine years? Ten? He hadn't taken that money, and even when the truth came out, what had it mattered? He hadn't wanted to go back, and they hadn't seemed to want him. Too hard for a pastor to admit he'd been wrong, and Sam was too proud to want an apology. What did he care about it now?

The basin in the baptismal font was filled with holy water. Must have done up the

Newcastle baby this morning. Odd the cover was off. Still, it wouldn't hurt to peek. Just to see what made holy water holy.

But his glimpse was disappointing. Holy water had no patina at all.

"Sam?" A voice called.

He didn't turn around. A lifetime of attending to sounds rather than sights had trained him to lift his chin. It didn't even occur to him to turn and look. He knew the voice wasn't that of Pastor Olson. Nor was it Pop or Josey or even Henry, the church handyman. Still, it was familiar.

"Yes, sir?" Sam replied.

"Do you believe in the Son of Man, Sam?"

Standing in the semi-darkness, one hand grasping the wooden edge of the font and the other clutching the handle of his cane, Sam thought this must be the question he had been waiting all his life to hear, though never before today had he been quite prepared to hear it. Darkness had always surrounded him; now that darkness had competition. This morning he would not have believed he could see. Truth be told, he had not altogether believed *anyone* could see.

But all that had changed. It was a new world now. A new reality. Church, as it turned out, held more than candles and hypocrites and tasteless wafers. Somewhere out there was a Rev. Lovejoy and his traveling band of worshiping hooligans. If he could believe a blind man could see, what else might be believed?

"I'd like to," Sam said at last. "If I knew who he was."

Then he did turn, and as he turned he realized he'd been clenching his eyes shut, and when he opened them the light from the open door was nearly blinding. And standing in the midst of that light—

“You’re looking at him,” the man said. “Seeing him, in fact. Hearing his voice.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, surprised and awe-struck at the same time. “I guess I do.”

Will the Real Voice Please Stand?

For many, the nature of this retelling will be obvious. I have simply re-imagined John chapter 9 in a modern context, hoping that by doing so I can bring out certain aspects of the original story that may not be obvious to contemporary readers. This approach required that I take liberties—that I lean into the possibilities. What might this story look like if it took place in the modern world, somewhere in the U.S., possibly in a small town in the middle of fly-over country?

My answers depended on many things, not the least of which is my imagination.

Theologian Wilda Gaffney defends the use of imaginative retellings based on the concept of a “sanctified imagination.” While I disagree with many of Gaffney’s conclusions, she is right about this. The scriptures were meant to be internalized by placing ourselves imaginatively inside their narratives.

The concept of the sanctified imagination is deeply rooted in a biblical piety that respects the Scriptures as the word of God and takes them seriously and authoritatively. This piety can be characterized by a belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and a profound concern never to misrepresent the biblical texts. ... The sanctified imagination is the fertile creative space in the text, and fills them out with missing details: names, back stories, detailed descriptions of the scene and characters, and so on.

Like classical and contemporary Jewish *midrash*, the sacred imagination tells the story behind the story, the story between the lines on the page.¹⁵³

Obviously we must be careful to honor the intent of Scripture. Any such retelling should

always be understood as derivative, not a replacement for the original but a tool for understanding it.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the great poet and theologian of the imagination, says that he and William Wordsworth were using the arts *to awaken the mind's attention*, to help us, just as science might help us, to look out and see what is really there and to discover that reality is itself numinous, translucent with glimmerings of the ‘supernatural,’ of something holy shining through it.¹⁵⁴

The alternative to richly imagining the Scriptures is to place them so far from the imagination that we only see the story from the outside, so that viewing biblical narratives becomes either a purely rational activity, like the solving of an equation, or it becomes a historical recreation that at best turns readers into moviegoers gazing at a silver screen. I would suggest that this approach is far more dangerous than actively allowing the imagination to dwell on what is written in the Bible. To become critical observers of the text without stepping into its action ourselves is to miss the point entirely.

Eugene Peterson highlights this point in describing his mother’s imaginative retellings of Bible stories:

She didn’t scruple, I realized, to considerably improve the biblical version when she felt like it. But I also realized, in my adult assessment of her narrative practice, that she rarely, if ever, violated or distorted the story itself. She held the entire Story, from Genesis to Revelation, in her believing imagination, with Jesus as the controlling presence throughout. However many details she got wrong (or invented), she never got the Story wrong—she knew it inside and out, knew Jesus obediently, the Holy Spirit reliving these texts in her as she prayed her way through the years¹⁵⁵ ...

Still, it is important to recognize where any retelling differs from the original of Scripture. In the case of Sam and Rev. Lovejoy, there are plenty of things for readers to quibble

with, plenty of choices that might have made the story better or more insightful. But telling a story means making story choices. And perhaps the most important choice is not always the most obvious one, in part because it takes the entire story to reveal.

I'm referring of course to its narrative *voice*.

In literary parlance, Voice describes the way a story is told, the combined choices that together communicate the essential personality of the one telling the story.

I chose to include details that would hint at a cultural background, a setting, and an attitude towards the church—among other things—all of which combine to form a narrative personality. The narrator telling Sam's story helps create the mood of the piece. It also determines the sorts of things that can rightly and honestly be included in the telling.

But that voice is not identical with my own. The voice of the narrator in my retelling is itself a creation, which is why writing nerds distinguish between a story's narrative voice and its authorial voice.

Here's an illustration of the difference from what many consider to be the greatest American novel, *Huckleberry Finn*. In the excerpt that follows, what we read is not a direct representation of the voice of Mark Twain, aka Samuel Clemens. Instead, the narrator is Huck Finn himself. Huck's personality, Huck as the narrator of the story, and everything about Huck, including his voice, is an invention of the story's author.

But this doesn't mean that Mark Twain isn't also present. In fact, Huck's *narrative voice* here is a filter through which Twain communicates his own perspective on the world. Some things that Huck says ring true for his personality, but they are not true at all about Twain's. Often this parallelism of voice is used for the sake of humor, as when Huck finds this poem written by a deceased teenager:

This young girl kept a scrap-book when she was alive, and used to paste obituaries and accidents and cases of patient suffering in it out of the *Presbyterian Observer*, and write poetry after them out of her own head. It was very good poetry. This is what she wrote about a boy by the name of Stephen Dowling Bots that fell down a well and was drownded:

ODE TO STEPHEN DOWLING BOTS, DEC'D

And did young Stephen sicken,
And did young Stephen die?
And did the sad hearts thicken,
And did the mourners cry?

No; such was not the fate of,
Young Stephen Dowling Bots;
Though sad hearts round him thickened,
'Twas not from sickness' shots.

No whooping-cough did rack his frame,
Nor measles drear with spots;
Not these impaired the sacred name,
Of Stephen Dowling Bots.

Despised love struck not with woe,
That head of curly knots;
Nor stomach troubles laid him low,
Young Stephen Dowling Bots.

O no. Then list with tearful eye,
Whilst I his fate do tell.
His soul did from this cold world fly,
By falling down a well.

They got him out and emptied him;
Alas it was too late;
His spirit was gone for to sport aloft,
In the realms of the good and great.

If Emmeline Grangerford could make poetry like that before she was fourteen, there ain't no telling what she could a done by and by.¹⁵⁶

It is this last line that most clearly illustrates the point. The poem Emmeline wrote is awful—so awful that it's funny. We know this, and Mark Twain *knows* that we know this, but

Huck doesn't know this. He thinks the poem is great art, which is what makes the whole thing so much fun to read. In a sense, it *is* great art. It is a great illustration of the art of irony and the art of storytelling. Huck remains perfectly in character as he tells the story. And behind him, perhaps chuckling himself, Samuel Clemens the *author* may be heard bringing this narrative to life.

Are the parallels for scripture here too obvious to mention? That each of the books of the Bible varies in its *narrative* voice while remaining consistent in its *authorial* one? Or that often the purpose of one seems to be at odds with that of the other, when in fact both are working together to create a larger picture, a more complete and artistic Story? Or, finally, that when all is said and done, the controlling ethic behind these variations is the Story itself?

Story is the primary way in which the revelation of God is given to us. The Holy Spirit's literary genre of choice is story. Story isn't a simple or naive form of speech from which we graduate to the more sophisticated, "higher" languages of philosophy or mathematics, leaving the stories behind for children and the less educated. From beginning to end, our Scriptures are primarily written in the form of story. ... story carries them all in its capacious and organically intricate plot.¹⁵⁷

The Voice of the Storyteller

In the story of the blind man from John chapter 9, visual and audial images play significant roles in highlighting what the story means. Of course, the story doesn't mean just one thing; it means many things. But if instead of standing above the Scriptures to merely read and interpret them—instead of even standing behind the crowd and watching the miracle take place from a safe distance—if we place ourselves imaginatively in Sam's shoes, in the shoes of a real blind man who really lived and really encountered the incarnate Christ, we will hear and see the story as never before, and in that order. We will hear it before we see it, because it is the voice of

the Shepherd we hear before we are ever led to seeing.¹⁵⁸

We are privileged to understand what we cannot yet see, that Jesus spits on the ground to make a little mud with his saliva. The Water of Life mixing once again with Earth to make human that which is not living, or not really living. He smears it on our eyes and tells us to “Go wash in the Pool of Siloam.” *Siloam* means sent.

So we go. We obey the voice of the Lord, and when we wash the mud away our sight returns and we go home elated because we have been touched by the divine, touched by something so far beyond our wildest dreams that we didn’t believe it was even possible. This sort of thing doesn’t really happen, does it? It certainly doesn’t happen to someone like you or me. Miracles are for the fortunate few, for the righteous, for the lucky, for the happily self-deceived. But whoever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind? Whoever thought God would lower himself to touch human flesh? Doesn’t he know us?

Then the crushing disappointment. We thought that surely our family and friends would be elated at our good fortune, that they would rejoice with us. It’s true! There is a God in Israel. He does hear the cries of the blind!

But no. We could see it on their faces. Our good fortune was their condemnation. The comfortable lies we’ve all told ourselves mustn’t be allowed to come crumbling down. Not for the sake of one blind man. There is simply too much to lose.

We are attacked. Almost immediately, and even in spite of the fact that these hostilities are outrageous and only prove that something else is at work behind the scenes. Dragged to court? For what? Disowned by our parents? Because they are afraid of the chief priests, afraid of being tossed from the synagogue as outcasts?

Then investigated. Investigated? Is being miraculously healed such a terrible thing to do?

It wasn't even our idea. It was *his*. (Whoever he is.) He was the one who made the mud—and remade our eyes.

Peppered by questions, we tell them this. They mock, because of course they don't understand. How could anyone understand *this*? And no matter how many times we tell the story it doesn't seem to make any difference. They don't want to know what really happened. They are looking for some way to spin the narrative to make it less condemning to themselves. What's wrong with them, after all, that God has not shown up in their lives? Surely, if he is who we say, he would have come to them first?

So they pressure us and throw us out of the synagogue and attack our reputation and lie about what happened. We were fine before. We were never really blind. We should have minded our own beggar-business.

We have done so many things wrong. Felt so many things, even reacted in anger. But we have done one thing right: we obeyed the voice of Jesus.

And we could now see, even if what we saw was that our friends and family had left us to fend for ourselves, left us alone on the outside looking in.

But we aren't alone in the end. Not really. Because at some point during that low period, that confusing state of in-between, we hear his voice again. Only this time it doesn't issue a command, it asks a question.

“Do you believe in the Son of Man?”

Which is a strange thing to ask, all things considered. Who are we to believe or not believe? After all that has already happened. And what does belief matter? What could it possibly change?

On the other hand, what do we have left? And so we ask, because there is really only this

one question or nothing. That is the choice. “Who is he, sir? Tell me so that I may believe in him.”

Later we will have to learn to look back on our past lives with grace, with the charity of hindsight. How could we know what Jesus looks like when we have never before seen him? Until this moment we have only heard his voice, and that only once and only a few words.

But there is no condemnation in his response. Just a statement of fact and a reminder of what came before. “You have now *seen* him; in fact, he is the one *speaking* with you.”

How could we have missed that voice? The one that commanded us to wash and be clean?

And what could we say in response but, “Lord, I believe.”

The New Covenant

No one who follows that voice regrets it, even though the consequences often involve counter-poised forces of spiritual antagonism. Afterwards, things may seem to get worse for a while.

But watch what happens. After the blind man is disowned and lied about and thrown from the synagogue—remember, he was a beggar and now has no source of income—after all of that, Jesus comes to him.

After the middle, Tension, section of his story, it’s not just the voice of the Lord breaking through the darkness. The moment he believes, the blind man sees Jesus. As Jesus put it, “no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”¹⁵⁹

I am the blind man who was given his sight. So too are you—unless you are still blind. Here in chapter 9 of John’s gospel there is no option to stand among the crowd and merely

observe. You might, I suppose, assume the position of a Pharisee, but that only ensures that your blindness will remain.¹⁶⁰

Jesus is the voice, the personality, of God in human form. And the New Covenant for which the New Testament is named is His promise to us about what God intends for every child of God who has been “born of the Spirit.”

This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”¹⁶¹

This quote, found in the New Testament book of *Hebrews*, is a reference to a prophetic promise originally made by Jeremiah.¹⁶² Notice that it is structured as a four-part covenant:

1. God will place his laws in human hearts and minds.
2. He will be our God, and we his people.¹⁶³
3. We will be taught personally by God Himself.
4. He will forgive and remove our sins.

The church has focused almost exclusively on the fourth part of this promise, the forgiveness of our sins, and downplayed the promise of direct, God-to-human interaction. *Why* we have done this is not difficult to understand, and easy to condone. The sheer *weirdness* of what is sometimes claimed as divine revelation, especially in charismatic circles, is enough to make even the stoutest of heart recoil.

Throughout the ages, our religious establishments have on occasion followed Caiaphas rather than Jesus, and this is something we must be on the alert for, all of the time. But how? How to stay open? How to make sure that the voice we hear is the voice of the Lord? There are all kinds of dirty devices that get in the way...¹⁶⁴

Isn't it safer to entrust the discernment of what's holy and true to a special class of clergy, to those who have been trained in theology and in biblical interpretation? Aren't we better off applying a little human reason to all of this? Isn't God, after all, both rational and orderly?

Everything in me wants to shout *yes*, *Yes*, and *YES!*

The problem with this approach is that it effectively negates two of the four promises found in the text, numbers 1 and 3 above. Moreover, we have seen what happens when we entrust someone other than Christ to act as the mediator between God and humanity. Church history is littered with the spiritual casualties of those who have been wounded or destroyed by a trust-me approach to the application of scripture to individual lives. At a conference years ago a woman told me she never read a book that wasn't first approved by her pastor. She had off-loaded the accountability of her own conscience to someone besides the Holy Spirit.

But do I really mean that God teaches us personally? Individually? And what exactly does that look like?

Before I try to answer these questions, allow me to point out that two chapters later, in chapter 10 of *Hebrews*, God's four-part promise is compressed into two main activities. That is, the transformation Christians experience through the influence of the Holy Spirit can be described in terms of something that is done immediately and something else that takes place throughout one's spiritual journey:

... by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says, "This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds." Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."¹⁶⁵

Put another way, God has perfected the Christian forever by removing his or her sins. But we nonetheless undergo a *process* of transformation—we are "being made holy,"—by God's

personal one-on-one instruction.

It is important to recognize that what is being written on the heart and on the mind is God's "law," which may be interpreted loosely as His requirements or more rigidly as the text of Scripture.

We tend to fall into one of two mistakes when evaluating what this means for us personally.

Pentecostals often err by deductively co-opting verses to support an argument or an idea those verses were never intended to make. "It's the anointing that breaks the heavy yoke," does not mean what some have implied by frequently referencing that biblical language.

On the other hand, Scripture itself, without the interpretive activity of the Holy Spirit, can be misunderstood and even twisted into a weapon. Satan can quote scripture.¹⁶⁶ And even the most learned can study the Bible for a lifetime and still miss the point:

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.¹⁶⁷

The simple solution to both of these errors is to embrace both Scripture and Spirit. It is Scripture that is being "written" on the heart and on the mind, and it is the Spirit who is doing the writing. We are made holy, transformed into Christ's image, by a revelation of God's Word conveyed to us personally and individually by the activity of the Holy Spirit. The Teacher promised by Jesus at the Last Supper will lead us into all truth.¹⁶⁸ He will bring glory to Jesus by taking from what is His and making it known to us.¹⁶⁹

To be clear, nothing about this suggests either

- a) that God cannot speak to us outside of his Word, nor
- b) that everything claimed as "Thus sayeth the Lord" is actually from God.

The stark and somewhat terrifying reality of the New Covenant is that God has promised to teach us personally through Scripture, and also that we live in a world in which this process can easily go wrong a million different ways. And ultimately, the only safeguards we have against getting off-track in this are

- a) Scripture itself, which is the standard by which every “thus sayeth” must be measured, and
- b) the patient activity of the Holy Spirit.

In other words, despite the fact that a lot can go wrong when we trust God Himself to speak to us through and about Scripture, He seems to think the payoff is worth the risk.

The real question is, *Do we?*

Evidence of how deeply God is committed to this process can be found all throughout the Bible, but especially in the New Testament. Space doesn’t permit a deeper exploration of how prevalent this theme is, but three examples should help to highlight the role the Voice of the Storyteller plays in the unfolding of the Story of Scripture.

First, In Matthew 16 Jesus asks the disciples who they say he is. Peter replies, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.¹⁷⁰

This is a foretaste of the New Covenant promise of teaching-by-revelation. Peter is not the rock on which Christ will build His church. He is a small rock, a *Petra*. The “rock” on which Christ will build his church is a massive boulder, an outcropping, a Gibraltar. That linguistic difference is a semiotic indicator that something else is going on here.

The rock on which Christ will build his church is the New Covenant activity of God revealing Himself to the human heart and mind by revelation. This is why Jesus called Simon “blessed.” Simon did not figure anything out by himself. It wasn’t because of his great Bible literacy that Jesus commended him, but because the Father had revealed something unexpected and otherwise unseeable.

Furthermore, the language Jesus uses is both revelatory and concealing, for this rock of revelation that will be the foundation of the church can be found in the Scriptures, in Daniel chapter 2. There Nebuchadnezzar’s dream is revealed to Daniel by the Spirit of God. It is unpacked as Daniel seeks God for understanding. And in that dream he is shown both the dream itself and the meaning of the dream: first the statue, which represents the empires of the age, then the smashing of that statue by “a rock cut out of a mountain, but not by human hands.”¹⁷¹ That rock is “a kingdom that will never be destroyed.”¹⁷² Daniel attests that “the great God has shown the king what will take place in the future. The dream is true and the interpretation is trustworthy.”¹⁷³

The rock that in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream becomes a mountain filling the whole earth is the kingdom of God, transmitted person-by-person, God-to-human. That rock in that dream is the rock on which Christ is building his Church. It is the rock of his voice.

Second, as we saw in chapter seven, the Parable of the Sower holds particular insight into the nature of this revelatory relationship between disciple and Master.

“Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him.”¹⁷⁴

What we are told to consider carefully is the Word sown by the Sower. What we *receive*

depends upon the nature, the measure, of our seeking. Notice the implications of the wording in verse 22: “Whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let him hear.”

Our discipleship depends upon hearing, upon receiving, from God. And what are we hearting and receiving? The “Words of eternal Life,” as Peter has called them.

In other words, it takes the Voice of God to explain the Word of God.

Third, the well-known story of the risen Christ walking with two disciples on the road to Emmaus, found in Luke 24, dramatizes the New Covenant promise of God writing his law on human hearts and minds. As it does, it also compares the revelation of his Word to the healing of physical blindness.

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?”¹⁷⁵

Here Christ explains what is written in the Scriptures. He does not tell them the future of Roman politics or describe church hierarchies. He does not advise them about which stock to buy or hint at who will win the World Series.

Jesus opens the Scriptures. He explains what is written, and when they see him offering them bread—the semiotic symbol of God’s word—their eyes are opened too.

Afterwards they realize that the Voice of the Lord has touched their hearts with fire.

But even though he is undeniably committed to the promise of the New Covenant, God

will nevertheless allow us to miss it. Just as he does not force the crowds to understand his parables, and just as he does not explain his stories even to his disciples until they ask him to, neither does he open our minds to the Scriptures today unless we respond to his invitation.

The blind man had to obey, had to go wash in the Pool of Siloam, in order to receive his sight. His obedience was not forced. But he *did* receive his sight. And when he was at his lowest, he saw God face to face.

So too does God speak into our blindness, and we can either go and wash in the Pool of Senn or we can try to wipe the mud away with our hands. The choice is ours.

God's voice is foundational to his relationship with humanity. God *wants* to speak to us. But we have distanced ourselves from him and stuck our fingers in our ears. While we wait for Tradition and Reason and YouTube personalities to explain the difficult passages of the Bible, Jesus waits for us. He stands at the door and knocks.

He *could* kick the door in, but he won't. That isn't his style.

His style is to let the ideals of the story and the free choices of individuals play out.

God is telling an incredible story. And he wants to involve us—to infuse our lives with layers of meaning we can't even imagine without Him. He wants to open our eyes.

But first, those who have ears to hear must hear.

9

An Ideal World

THEME

The first conflict depicted in the Bible is the story of humanity's fall from innocence in the Garden of Eden. Tempted by a serpent, the first two people—who had been made in God's image and given dominion over the Earth—succumbed to the desire to eat from the one tree they were warned to avoid, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

This story has been the subject of so much scrutiny by theologians and philosophers and psychologists that it is difficult to approach it as a story without acknowledging all the baggage that has been loaded onto it through the ages. (Is it a myth? Is it history? It's the woman's fault! A talking *snake*? Really?) Yet it must be understood if we are to recognize the story the Bible is telling us, because the story of the Fall is where the story begins to look like a story. The appearance of the serpent is what screenwriters might call an “inciting incident.”

However you take it, this is where the biblical drama of history begins. It is not just where sin entered the world; it is where conflict entered the story. Since Story as we know it does not exist without conflict of some sort, we can say that here is where the story of the humanity became recognizable as a story.

The Garden of Eden is more than just a mythic container for a prehistory that would have seemed ancient even to the ancients. It is the proximate cause of every conflict that followed it, and as such is basis of the main story arc of Scripture.

This account is crammed with poetic language, with metaphor, and with multivalent symbolism. It is also arranged so that its chiastic structure (also known as *ring* structure, which we will cover in the next chapter) conveys meanings which are not readily apparent to modern audiences, even to scholars.¹⁷⁶ For instance, the center of this story, which takes place from Gen 2:5 to Gen 3:24, is found in the temptation to disobedience at the story's midpoint (3:1-6).

The effect is to give special emphasis to the pivotal central point. In the Eden story, this place is occupied by the intervention of the serpent. The serpent's malice is highlighted even more by the play on two words quite different in meaning but sounding very like each other, which comes in adjacent verses (2:25 and 3:1—chapter divisions are medieval, not original, in the Hebrew Bible). These words refer respectively to the nakedness of the human pair and the slyness of the serpent. But note (very important): Hebrew has two words for "naked": one is used in contexts of sexual activity, the other, used in 2:25, always connotes vulnerability—of children and other helpless persons.¹⁷⁷

Because so much is either implied or deliberately left ambiguous, we can't help but draw conclusions based on our own experiences and cultural values and ways of reading literature.

This is why the Eden story is so easy to misread, particularly when scrutinizing it for doctrines or for propositional truths instead of approaching it first as a story. To understand the implications of Eden we must wrestle with the meanings conveyed in the interaction of its various story elements. To really discover what this story is about (and remember, a story is never about its plot), we must recognize its underlying theme.

This, as I've already said, is difficult for numerous reasons. But the most important reason is one that the story itself is trying to point out. We have trouble recognizing the theme here because by the time we are old enough to read this story for ourselves we have already rejected its message. This is almost certainly why the idea is presented in story form; otherwise we would have no chance of recognizing and responding to its truth. It must be encountered in

the form of a literary parable in order to bypass our self-protective (and self-destructive) faculties.

Here, as in the parables of Jesus, much of the meaning of this story is hidden—and hidden on purpose—so that only those who have ears to hear and are willing to hear will discover the treasure hidden within. Such revelation requires the subtle psychological impact of a story for its delivery, yet we can still miss the point when we are not ready or willing to receive its insight.

It is important to recognize that the central conflict of the biblical story is the fate of God's creation—all of His creation. That which he created as “good” (or *tov*: beautiful, good, and true) would be ruled over and cared for by those he created in His image as “very good”—in other words, by humans.

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”¹⁷⁸

Adam and Eve have been given authority to rule as representatives of God's divine authority. They are King and Queen of the whole world, and the world itself is a place of duality, with Eden the “pivot point,” or connecting middle, where heaven and earth overlap.

In the very center of this middle place of overlapping contexts—the place where heaven kisses earth—God plants two trees that are saturated in literary significance.

And the LORD God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.¹⁷⁹

Here we have not only two trees, but two very different ways of understanding what these trees represent. The tree of life is perhaps not difficult to wrap one's mind around: later we

will learn that to eat from that tree is to “live forever.”¹⁸⁰

But the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is more difficult, in part because the combination of words that describe it—knowledge, good, evil—are themselves easily perceived as distinct and separate ideals, two of which are universal goods. We assume, quite unconsciously, that both *knowledge* and *good* should be placed on the Positive side of the moral compass.

This raises a biting and curious question: Why has God declared knowing not just evil, but good, to be off limits? Doesn’t he want moral creatures ruling in his stead?

But we must remember that there are two trees, and those trees stand in contradistinction. It is only the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which has been forbidden. Adam and Eve are free to eat from the tree of life, but they choose not to.

And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”¹⁸¹

All of this is a setup for the conflict that will follow, first through Eve’s dilemma, then through the consequences of the submission of Adam and Eve to the serpent’s deception. It is worth mentioning that Eve’s decision is not a true dramatic dilemma in the sense of being a choice between two terrible alternatives. Instead, it is a tragic dilemma, for it demonstrates the tragedy of an avoidable catastrophe caused by a wrong moral choice.

An astute observer will notice that Eve, and then Adam, both make a decision requiring some knowledge of moral imperatives. If they did not yet know right from wrong, their decision to eat from that tree could not itself be wrong. The traditional answer to this question is that they had the command of God not to eat from it, therefore they did not need to know right and wrong for themselves. They knew enough to rely on the good and wise counsel of God himself.

This in turn implies that the tree represents something quite different than what we expected at first. Indeed, a superficial reading of the story is likely to create confusion about what's really happening, which is why the story must be read as a story before it is measured for doctrine.

The answer to what the tree really offers is, ironically, found in the temptation spoken to Eve by the serpent. Robert Alter's translation reads:

“You shall not be doomed to die. For God knows that on the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will become as gods knowing good and evil.” And the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was lust to the eyes, and the tree was lovely to look at, and she took of the fruit and ate, and she also gave to her man, and he ate. And the eyes of the two were opened, and they knew they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.¹⁸²

The serpent's promise was that they would “become as gods knowing good and evil.” Other translations often render this, “you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”¹⁸³ The difference lies in the ambiguity of the underlying word *elohim*, which can mean either *God* or *gods*. If read as *God*, the temptation is an accusation that God is trying to prevent the humans from being like him, which is something of an absurdity given that they were already created in his image. (Then again, temptation is often absurd, especially in hindsight.) But if it is read as *gods*, then the temptation is more of an invitation, for the serpent is presenting an offer of solidarity for the humans to join an ongoing rebellion. We will discover later that heaven has already experienced a division within its “divine council” as certain “sons of God”—themselves spirit beings—have turned away from the Creator. *Join us*, the serpent seems to be saying, *in our fight to define good and evil for ourselves!*

Either way, this latter statement is the point, for the tree of knowing good and evil is not a

shortcut to such knowledge, but a detour around it. The tree they have been told not to eat from is too often misunderstood as an endowment of moral wisdom. It isn't. What the tree represents is the act of throwing off God's definitions of good and evil in order to make those distinctions independently. It is the tree of deciding for yourself what you will call good and evil.

This is why the tree appears so beautiful, its fruit so delicious. This is why it is "lust to the eyes."

More importantly, this is the key to understanding the explosion of evil that overtakes the world immediately after they eat from it.

Most of our moral problems are rooted in our human, perhaps innate, desire to place the moral compass of the universe within ourselves. Our stories get off track when they seduce us into viewing everything within a story through the lens of its protagonist's desires and well-being. But such stories are still attractive; it isn't difficult to convince us that what's good for Sarah Q. Super must be good and right. After all, we already believe that what's good for ourselves must be morally right, and what is a protagonist if not a projection of the self in a fictional world?

The story of Eden is the setup for human history because it points to the underlying root of our collective problem: each of us believes that we are qualified to be the moral center of the universe.

But however brilliant or wise or virtuous you are, you can never know all of the factors that go into what makes something good or evil. We see in part and we experience in part. Our perspective as humans is always limited. We think we see the whole moral equation, but something has always been left out.

This is why the very claim to "know good and evil" is itself evil. It's why Google's

original motto, “Don’t be evil,” was a trap. It is *always* a trap, because when you’re the arbiter of right and wrong, you’ll always find ways to define evil as the things you’re not doing or the things your enemy is doing.

Throughout the Old Testament God implores his people to “do what is right in my eyes.”¹⁸⁴ When they do what is right in their own eyes, the results are catastrophic, as the book of *Judges* attests.¹⁸⁵

If this surrender to moral relativism were the only thing happening between the serpent and the humans, the story would be dire enough. But the situation is much worse than this seemingly innocuous lie and its consequences would lead us to believe.

Our Enlightenment rationalism and materialist philosophy have blinded us to the spiritual dimension that is taken for granted in this story. Without a demonic realm and a conflict that is larger than the disobedience of God’s naive children, the story simply doesn’t hold together. It’s true that their eating from the wrong tree has devastating consequences. But those consequences were not limited to generational “fallenness.” The story of the Fall is not merely that humanity broke its own innocence. The story of the Fall is the story of how the first human regents surrendered their dominion authority to a demonic rebellion hell-bent on misusing it.

Adam and Eve were given divine rulership on earth. In yielding to the serpent’s deception, they handed that authority to God’s spiritual adversaries. We know very little from the Bible about what these adversaries look like or what this resistance to God’s plan entailed. Paul referred to them as “principalities” and “powers” or, in the NIV, “spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”¹⁸⁶ We also know that in the New Testament Jesus calls Satan the “evil one”¹⁸⁷ and “the prince of this world,”¹⁸⁸ and implies that Satan has at his disposal a hierarchy of powerful and wicked spirit agents.¹⁸⁹ But we aren’t given significant glimpses behind the

spiritual curtain, and we must accept this fact as intentional; what we aren't told clearly is also part of the unfolding story.

What we *are* told is that after eating the forbidden fruit the first humans were cut off from the tree of life by "cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth."¹⁹⁰

Understanding the underlying theme of Scripture requires that we ponder the significance of this opening conflict.

So God has placed two trees in the middle of the Garden of Eden, the place where heaven and earth meet.

One tree is the tree of life. The first humans do not eat from the tree of life when they can, and later the way to it is barred. Though they are never commanded *not* to eat from the tree of life, the path to that tree is cut off.

The other tree is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they are warned not to eat from it lest they die. The serpent promises that they won't die, but instead will become like the gods knowing good and evil.

Here we must pause to take stock of the thematic elements the story has given us. Notice first that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is connected to a perceived *power*, something that equates to godhood, as well as to death. The tree of life is connected only to life; no other power is implied.

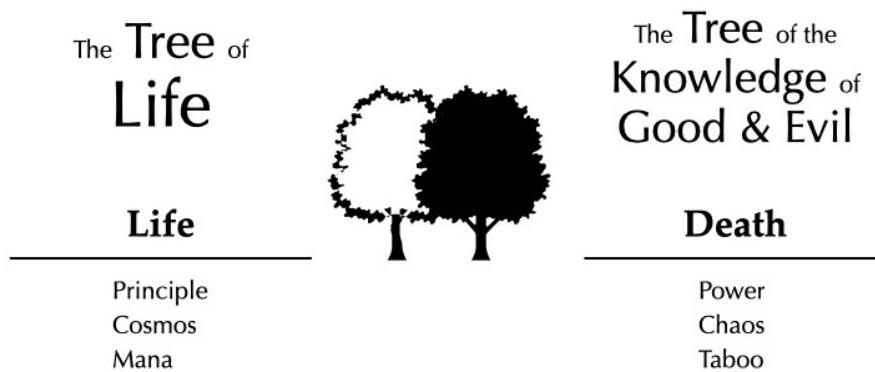
Madeleine L'Engle's description of the two kinds of power may prove helpful here:

In so-called primitive societies there are two words for power, *mana* and *taboo*: the power which creates and the power which destroys; the power which is benign and the power which is malign. Odd that we have retained in our vocabulary the word for dangerous power, *taboo*, and have lost *mana*. Power always has both of these aspects, as the storyteller knows. ... It is this double aspect of power which the artist must be brave enough to

explore.¹⁹¹

If L'Engle is right, then mana and taboo are really just different words for *cosmos* and *chaos*, for what I have called *ideals* or *values* or *principles* on the one hand and *unprincipled power* on the other.

Thus we might diagram the thematic nature of these trees as embodiments of an unexpected revelation.



Two things make this diagram surprising. First, naked power is aligned with the serpent, not with the Creator. I say this is surprising because we tend to assume that all power resides in the hands of God. But if power here is the sort of power that is uncontrolled and chaotic, then it cannot possibly be a characteristic of the LORD God.

Second, both *good* and *evil* appear to stand opposed to *life*. But it is not really these traits which oppose life; it is the *knowledge* of good and evil arrived at through one's own wisdom or personal preference.

Solomon makes the case for this interpretation in Proverbs 9, which, like the Garden account, presents the central dilemma of humanity as a decision between two oppositional forces: we can listen to one voice or the other, but not both. The poem is a contrast between Wisdom and Folly, both of which are embodied as women who invite the “simple” to their

respective houses for a meal. In the opening, Wisdom offers food and drink, meat and wine, to any who would come. “Leave your simple ways and you will live,” she says. “Walk in the way of insight.”¹⁹²

Contraposed against Wisdom is the “unruly woman” Folly. She too calls aloud to the simple who pass by, but her invitation is quite different. “Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious.” But as the final line of the poem points out,

But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are deep in the realm of the dead.¹⁹³

The themes of life and death seem at first to be connected only to Wisdom and Folly. But the structure of this section may reveal a deeper connection to the story of the Fall. Remember that it is the (unmatched) center of a chiasm that reveals the underlying point of the whole.¹⁹⁴ And the center of this portion of the book is an allusion to the two trees at the center of Eden.

The beginning of Wisdom is fear of the LORD, and knowing the Holy One is discernment. For through Me your days will be many, and the years of your life will increase.¹⁹⁵

Discernment here is knowing good and evil; that is, the only way to know good and evil is to know the Holy One. To eat from the tree of life is wisdom, but to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is folly. Folly deceives her victims, promising “stolen water” and “food eaten in secret”—a Garden reference—which ends in death.

Steven Pinker’s recasting of the Aristotelian objection to God as the source of morality reveals just how deep our human foolishness runs:

Is something moral because God commands it, or does God command some things because they are moral? If the former is true, and God had no reason for his commandments, why should we take his whims seriously? If God commanded you to torture and kill a child, would that make it right? “He would never do

that!” you might object. But that flicks us onto the second horn of the dilemma. If God does have good reasons for his commandments, why don’t we appeal to those reasons directly and skip the middleman?¹⁹⁶

Pinker’s argument here presents a false dichotomy based on faulty presuppositions and the use of a loaded word, “whim,” to mischaracterize the nature of God. Moral absolutes do not exist outside of God. Neither are they a whim, and for the same reason. Whim suggests that God’s perfect moral standards might have been otherwise, or are random and disconnected from anything absolute. But God *is* the absolute. His nature *is* moral perfection. The demand to *know the reasons* for his commands is the demand to be the standard, the one who decides what will be called good and evil.

Pinker’s objection is thus the same old satanic lie (and one we will explore further in the next chapter), that God’s claim of moral perfection is nothing more than a preference (a “whim”) based on *power*. But that doesn’t work, and it leaves us with the problem of the Garden: we want two things that we cannot have simultaneously: to be both the Sender of meaning and the Sign. We want to call ourselves *good* in a universe that has been stripped of any basis for believing that objective good and evil can really exist. We want purpose, but not responsibility.

The Two Trees as Stories

Most of our stories follow familiar patterns that add to our enjoyment by echoing and reversing our expectations. This is particularly apparent with the major genres. In books as well as in movies, an audience will come to a story prepared for certain structural and aesthetic elements. In a novel, the writer must signal the genre within the first four pages or readers will be frustrated—and four pages is often too long. Most books indicate their genre on the first page, not to mention in the artwork of the cover. The same is true in the cinema. Few people will buy

tickets to a film not having any idea what genre they're about to watch. Still, certain clues will appear on screen almost immediately, often before the opening credits: a spaceship hurtles through space; a lone rider approaches a western ghost town, a scientist removes a radioactive material from a vault and places it in a mobile carrier. In a flash we understand that we are watching a space opera, a western, or a thriller.

Such expectations form the structure of genre, which is based not only on aesthetic expectations but on one or two Great Questions that shape the nature of each genre. Westerns, for example, are explorations of the clash between civilization and barbarism, which find symbolic expression in the period and setting. The American West, after all, was a place of rapid expansion that brought European culture, with its more advanced technology, into direct confrontation against the culture of the First Nations tribes. Thus the western genre in all its forms is asking us to consider what makes civilization civilization. Is it the presence of a Sheriff? But what if the Sheriff is himself corrupt? Or perhaps it is the presence of technology in the form of trains and Conestoga wagons and repeating rifles so often pitted against bareback Apache riders armed only with bows? But is it really civilized to mow down the bison or drive out the Native Americans or bully the farmers for grazing pasture?

Every genre has its Great Questions, and every genre has a central emotional hook—a core emotion that is the promise of feeling an audience buys into when they first crack open a book or sink into a theater seat. The core emotion of science fiction and fantasy is wonder, for instance, and that of the horror genre is, not unexpectedly, horror. Romance stories promise to kindle a feeling of longing that signals romantic love, and dramas tend to offer a true-to-life tension between satisfaction and sadness.

But we are concerned here primarily with theme, not the mechanics of genre, which I

have mentioned only to make a point that is otherwise difficult to illustrate. Story uses multiple structural layers to communicate meaning. It aims to affect the mind through the heart, which means it is always working in parallel worlds, both through direct access (the “low road” of emotion) and through indirect access (the “high road” of reason).¹⁹⁷ If these seem backwards, it is probably because we have been taught to distrust our emotions and depend only on our faculties of reason for objective truth.

Thematically, I would suggest that there is a deeper level of storytelling that derives from the conflicting nature of our broken humanity. Humanity has developed two contrasting formulas for the exploration of reality through Story. These formulas operate in the background of every story, their influence so pervasive and so subtle that audiences are effectively blind to them.

The first formula is the dominant one found in most superhero movies and commercial fiction. It pits a hero, the embodiment of principled power, against some villain who is endowed with unprincipled power. The Avengers, for instance, must overcome Thanos to restore order to the world; Superman must defeat General Zod; Captain America must take down Red Skull. And this pattern isn’t unique to superhero films. How many westerns end with some variation of a gunfight between a white hat and a black vest? How many war movies turn on some act of valor in which the protagonist single-handedly wipes out an enemy platoon? Courtroom dramas follow this pattern too, as do sports stories, heist stories, revenge stories, and even love stories.

What gives these stories their power is a clear embodiment of good and evil that affirms the audience’s natural inclination to place the center of the moral compass in the self. It is a seductive storytelling formula because it has the appearance of being right. Good vs. Evil is natural to us. At a glance we can see that such stories are *good for eating* and *lovely to look at*. They are, to borrow from Robert Alter’s language, lust to the eyes. So we take the fruit and eat it,

and when the good guy wins in the end we cheer, regardless of the body count. It doesn't really matter that in a story such as, say, *The Hunger Games*, those bodies belong to children who have been harvested by a corrupt government for the entertainment of the masses. They were on the wrong side. They were evil. And are we not entertained?

This is why I connect the first story formula to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I believe it derives directly from our addiction to deciding morality for ourselves. But it not only derives from that addiction, it encourages it.

The second formula is far less common in modern stories, and you can probably guess why. How does one create a story based on the tree of life?

The simple answer is found in the thematic structure of the story of the Garden of Eden. Rather than pitting Principled Power against Unprincipled Power, tree of life stories set naked Principle against naked Power. Or, put another way, they set *cosmos* against *chaos*, *mana* against *taboo*. For example:

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington: Starry-eyed, boyish Mr. Smith, played by Jimmy Stewart, is appointed temporary senator and expected to vote along party lines. But when he discovers the latent corruption of the government and media systems, he takes a lone stand to reveal the truth. Opposed by nearly everyone, he eventually overcomes through the use of a filibuster in which he does nothing but tell the truth. Capra's film thereby affirms that Truth, stripped of every supporting framework, is still more powerful than money, muscle, and a corrupt media.

Life is Beautiful: Guido Orefice, played by Roberto Benini, is a Jewish man who is sent to a Nazi concentration camp with his eight-year-old son, Joshua. There he tells the boy that they are playing a game, and he spends all his energy reframing every hardship as something beautiful. Beauty stripped of every accouterment is thus pitted against the power of the Nazis. In re-storying the horrors of reality, the audience is invited to ponder the film's theme that *life is beautiful even in the*

ugliest circumstances.

Braveheart: William Wallace spends much of the film hacking his way through the perpetually evil English armies sent to conquer Scotland. The film therefore appears to be a good vs. evil formula. But its resolution turns this expectation on its head when Wallace allows himself to be tortured, refusing to yield to the king's demand that he ask for mercy. Instead he cries out, "Freedom!" and is at last beheaded. *Braveheart* places the will to be free, regardless of circumstances, as the ultimate master of those who would enslave another.

The Lord of the Rings: In both the novel and film versions of this story, evil is not overcome by goodness. Rather, evil destroys itself. The real heroes of the story are not those who are the most accomplished fighters. Even Gandalf, the iconic wizard mentor of the tale, is not its true hero. Instead, what makes the story work is the unwillingness of hobbits to give in to temptation. Virtue embodied in the most humble of creatures turns out to be more powerful than Sauron and all of his armies.

Each of these is what I would call a *tree of life* story because its resolution depends on some pure principle or ideal—stripped of all external power—overcoming the sorts of power that seem to rule the world (money, influence, brawn, etc).

Perhaps not surprisingly, I only began to notice the underlying difference between these two types of stories as a result of studying both Genesis and the works of four Christian novelists whose work heavily influenced the genres of fantasy and science fiction. These genres are my imaginative playground as a novelist, yet it still took me decades of study to recognize the common thread that tied George MacDonald to G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien. The latter two were of course friends at Oxford and critiqued each other's works regularly. And George MacDonald was so influential on literature that it should be no surprise many Christian writers in the early- to mid- 20th century were influenced by his work.

But I am not referring to whatever doctrinal or theological beliefs they held in common. I mean only that all four of these writers held to the tree of life formula described above. Chesterton, for example, is perhaps best known for his *Father Brown* mysteries, which have as their protagonist a priest for a sleuth. Father Brown uses his knowledge of humanity to solve crimes. But Brown's objective is never merely the solving of the crime. It is restoration. In "The Hammer of God," Brown solves the crime and then leaves justice to the perpetrator, not to the police. He is more concerned with the man's standing before God than before a human court. Or take *Manalive*, Chesterton's novel of a supposed criminal who turns out to have broken only the laws of mankind, not the laws of God.

I could list many examples, but perhaps one more will make the point better than a longer list, for this particular story is well known and has been told in both versions, as a tree of life story and as a tree of knowledge story.

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe was the first book C. S. Lewis wrote in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series. In it four children go through the back of a wardrobe into a fantasy world ruled by a terrible villain, the White Witch who has put a spell over the land to make it always winter and never Christmas. What makes the book a fascinating study in formula is that on close inspection it turns out to be a tree of life story. That is, the book draws all its power from the relationship between the children and Aslan. Their journey is a discovery of both the Great Lion and of themselves in relation to him. The real conflict in the book—all its dramatic tension—derives from the fact that Aslan seems to have disappeared from Narnia. And yet there are whispers that *Aslan is on the move!* The talking animals and other *fae* creatures whisper in secret that he is coming, and coming soon. But will it be soon enough?

Indeed, it is sooner than we expect, for Aslan arrives in time to make a deal with the

Witch to rescue the traitorous boy Edmund, life-for-life. And the point is not that this is an allegory for Christ (though it obviously is), but that the conflict is not one of power defeating power. It is one of principle defeating power.

In the 2005 movie version of the story, the filmmakers missed this. Instead of Aslan arriving to set things right in Narnia, Aslan arrives to defeat the Witch. This may seem a small point, but it is really gigantic. The film makes evil the problem and goodness the solution. It places the climax of the conflict at the moment when Aslan devours (offscreen) the White Witch. As an affirmation that good is better than evil, this change works. And perhaps it was a natural change to make when adapting the more internal journey of a novel into the more external images of a film. Still, the effect is profound in the way it deals with the original theme of the story. Instead of the children going to Narnia to encounter Aslan, they have gone to Narnia to help win a war. They are no longer types of “true humans”—of “sons of Adam” and “daughters of Eve”—as we were all meant to be.¹⁹⁸ They are instead children of royal birthright who embody the ideals of the tree of the knowledge and good and evil. Meanwhile, the invitation to life through relationship with Aslan has been removed from the story.

Perhaps this shouldn’t be surprising. We are no longer in the Garden of Eden, after all. And which of us can argue that we have not eaten from the forbidden fruit of the wrong tree ourselves? Or that our predisposition to judging our neighbor is really the fault of our long-dead forebears?

Sons of Adam and daughters of Eve indeed!

If we are to be pitied it is not because we had no choice in siding with the satanic rebellion after the first humans surrendered dominion authority to the Evil One. On the contrary, we are pitiable because we have blinded ourselves with a lie that is so easily refuted.

... every man was his own Newton, in a world dropping with apples. Only when poesy, who is herself alive, looks backward, does she see at a glance how much younger is the Tree of Knowledge than the Tree of Life.¹⁹⁹

10

Behold a Wonderful Hippo!

CONTEXT

The book of *Job* is the story of humanity.

Theologically, it serves many functions, not the least of which is establishing the context of the Biblical through line—the story arc that runs from Genesis to Revelation. It is also a straightforward tale of faithfulness and a profound exploration of suffering. *Job* asks deep questions that speak to the existence of ultimate meaning, and is rightly considered “wisdom literature.”²⁰⁰

If you look further, dig deeper, and dare to read the story as a story, you will see much more: not only does the tale offer a prophetic depiction of the messiah, it also establishes the basis of his victory over satanic dominion. And it does so through a narrative template that will later inspire the two primary conflicting story patterns of history. One of these embraces *Job*'s central theme and the other rejects it, but both have shaped the development of theme in great stories ever since.

But at its heart, *Job* is serving an even broader vision, for it asks a question that must ultimately be answered by each of us: *Is God good if he isn't good to me?*

Some will take exception to the wording of this question on the grounds that God is always good to everyone, but from a human perspective, this phrasing captures the dilemma of meaningless suffering and must be dealt with. *Is God always good?* If so, why the Holocaust?

Why cancer? Why the million faces of human evil?

In facing this central question head on, the book of *Job* establishes the context not only of the rest of scripture, but of all reality. It is a cosmological book that seeks to answer the unanswerable.

But before the book can be navigated as scripture, it must be experienced as a story.

Here, as elsewhere, it is not the head that leads the way, but the tale. To understand *Job*, you must let it break your heart. If it doesn't break your heart, you are probably reading it as *sacred* or *wise* or *important* without letting it first sap you of any confidence in human answers. *Job* is of course sacred and wise and important, but it is these things only later, after it is the story of a right side up man in an upside down world.

So pull up a chair and listen to how the story goes down:

Once upon a time there was this really great guy named Job. When I say he was great, I don't mean he was the sort of guy who would buy you a beer or come over for Sunday football. I don't mean he was someone who could keep a secret or knew how to tell a joke or was always ready to loan you his cordless drill.

No, no. Job was morally good. Not goody-two-shoes good or someone who always gave at the office good, but someone who gave his shoes away when nobody was looking. The sort of person who fed homeless people every day and then went home and cried because he couldn't do more for them. He carried other people's troubles even when they were beyond his help. Job was Mother Teresa with a beard, except that Job lived in the ancient world, a world so comparatively brutal that his goodness was almost blinding in contrast.

And why was that world so brutal?

Well, that's part of the story. Looking back, you could say that the reason was a lack of civil government; there were few enforceable laws and fewer police to enforce them. But that doesn't come close to describing the problem. You could say that slavery and murder were so commonplace that people assumed these atrocities were part of a divine order. Which is also

sort of true. People no doubt felt the brokenness of the world but could find no explanation for it except that the gods probably intended it to be that way. To some, life must have seemed like a cosmic sitcom, and mortal humans were just serving the entertainment appetites of distant and unknowable masters.

What people could not see was that the source of their torments originated with a cosmic split in the heavenly realm. It was not God doing all this damage, but a spirit being named Satan who, back when this story takes place, had somehow usurped the divine authority granted to humans and was now ruling the earth as a kind of demi-god regent.

This wasn't what God—the real God—intended. But something had happened when Satan took over, and now a spiritual war was splitting apart both heaven and earth, with God claiming to be the source of things like Goodness and Justice and Truth, and Satan claiming that these things never really mattered because, in the end, power is what drives the universe.

So when the good God of the Hebrews looked down and saw how Job was living his life, he was delighted. It's one thing to be good in heaven where the presence of God is always tangible. It's quite another to be good on earth where the presence of evil lurks around every corner. But here was Job, doing all this good stuff anyway, and under such harsh conditions. Job daily shook his fist at the satanic ethic of do-as-you-please, and lived as a moral rebel, doing right instead of serving himself.

What made this even more impressive was that Job had no idea about the cosmic conflict taking place backstage. Because he could see neither God nor Satan, Job had to choose how to live his life based on the clues of physical reality. All he had to go on were his reason and his senses and his innate conscience.

You know how hard that is even in the modern world with our hospitals and Amazon deliveries and food banks. Imagine what that must have been like back then. Even God was impressed. In fact, God blessed Job in everything he did, as if to say, "Keep going! Keep being good! You are a great example for everyone else who has given up on the ideals of Justice and Mercy and Integrity." So every time Job gave away his shoes, he discovered he'd somehow gotten twelve more pairs of Rockport loafers in size 10W by the time he returned home.

Satan took this divine endorsement of Job personally, and personally came to God's royal court just as the "sons of God"²⁰¹ were presenting themselves²⁰². The accusation Satan brought appeared to be leveled at Job, but was really an assault on God's character. It seems the

“accuser” wanted more than dominion; he wanted to tear down the very basis of God’s claim to authority.

This is the context developed in the opening chapters of *Job*. It is essential to understand this in some depth—that is, as a *story*—because even though the meaning of *Job* is directly connected to its dramatic structure, that meaning won’t be clear if you look past the actors and strain to see the lights and wires of the stage.

For modern readers this presents an interesting problem. We are so familiar with the devices of contemporary storytelling that we sometimes overlook ones that were taken for granted by ancient audiences. Sure, we can understand *Job* with the help of Characterization, Plot, Context, Theme, and Voice, but in this case Context requires contextual intelligence. Just as mystery lovers understand the conventions of the genre and bring certain expectations to every Agatha Christie novel, so we too must be prepared for the particular sort of story we are in for with *Job*.

Job utilizes three narrative devices not always recognized by modern readers, or even by biblical scholars who are trained to spot linguistic patterns but not dramatic ones.

These three narrative devices, each a different form of parallelism, provide the backbone for everything in the story.

1. Earth is a reflection of heaven

The first device is a motif of *reflectivity*. What happens in the physical realm is a reflection of something that has already happened in the spiritual realm. Thematically, this *event parallelism* assumes a contradictory worldview from that of ancient magical cultures, which tried to force reflections in the spiritual realm by manipulating aspects of the physical one.

In *Job*, we see the opposite happening. Instead of people changing the world of the gods, the world is moved and shaped by an unseen otherness that precedes our physical experiences.

The spirit world is mirrored in the physical world. Or, to put it from the human point of view, *what happens on Earth has, in some fashion, already happened in heaven.*²⁰³

Thus, what happens in the opening two chapters is being reproduced as the story unfolds. God's experience is being mirrored, in part, through Job's experience.

This motif establishes what is happening in the heavenly realm as the source of what will follow on earth. But instead of portraying a “heaven-wills-it” dynamic, the story presents a spiritual realm that is already divided and in conflict.

That *Earth is a reflection of heaven* is essential context for a literal unfolding of *Job*'s dramatic arc.

2. The chiastic structure of *Job* both conceals and reveals its theme

Chiastic structure is common in the Bible.²⁰⁴ It is a form of *structural parallelism* that makes almost everything reflective. It's not just heaven and earth that are mirrored; the first and last things are also mirror images of each other; the second and second-to-last things are likewise reflected; and so on until the middle of the story, which is the dramatic high point. Sometimes in a chiastic structure the middle contains a direct repetition; other times it stands alone. Either way, this central pairing (or lack of a paired repetition) is meant to call attention to the importance of what happens in the middle, the “central pivot.”²⁰⁵

Put more simply, chiastic stories are like hamburgers assembled in a specific order: bun - sauce - hamburger patty - sauce - bun. The center, the hamburger patty, is the main thing. We call this sort of sandwich a “hamburger,” not a “bunburger” nor a “sauceburger.”

The hamburger patty in the book of *Job* is found not quite in the center, but in the chiastic center—that is, the center of the pairings—which is chapter 28, the “Ode to Wisdom.”²⁰⁶

Structurally, the book of *Job* can be outlined with a simple chiastic pattern:

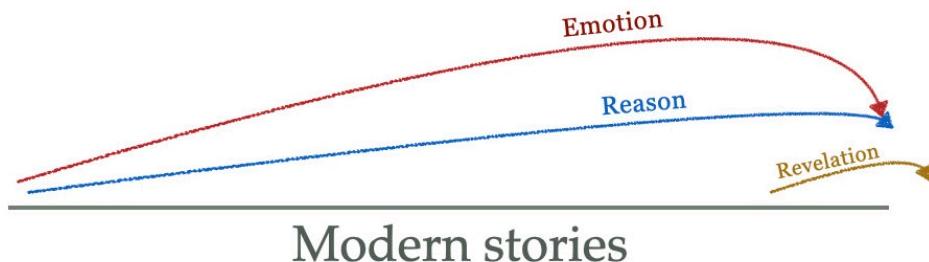
- A. Backstory
- B. Confrontation
- C. Temptation
- D. Interlude (Ode to Wisdom)
- C' Temptation
- B' Confrontation
- A' Resolution

Its structure is more complicated than this, but for now this outline is enough to make the point. In *Job*, the first thing is the last thing, the second thing is the second-to-last thing, etc., with the main theme highlighted by its place in the center.

Chiastic stories are probably meant to draw their dramatic power from being read aloud rather than consumed by readers scanning the text silently.²⁰⁷

Contemporary novels and movies are not structured this way. Instead, they tend to build their dramatic arcs in a way that heightens the audience’s *emotional* reaction; our reasoning faculties come into play, but are secondary. Only during or after the story’s climax are we meant to experience revelation about all that came before.

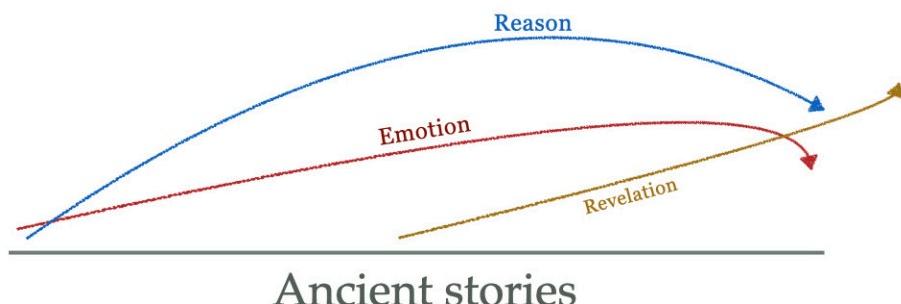
Modern stories, in other words, make their highest goal not the transmission of wisdom, but the stimulation of raw experience. Modern storytelling is based on the psychological reality that we are more easily moved and manipulated by emotion than we are by reason or by conscience. Thus our stories often end up looking like this:



Ancient chiastic stories, on the other hand, seem more often to have as their goal the gradual revelation of some larger truth over the course of the story, particularly in the second half. The audience is meant to pick up on the clues of matched sets that begin just after the middle.

“...an ancient was compelled to use structural signals that would be perceptible to the listening audience. Signals were geared for the ear; not the eye...”²⁰⁸

In putting together these pieces while the story continues to unfold, the mind is led to a sense of increasing excitement and expectation. It's not that emotion is suppressed; rather, emotion is subjected to reason as its master. The audience gains increasing confidence about the nature of the unmatched middle, but is forced to recall what that central point was as new information is being given.



Chiastic storytelling forces emotion into a secondary role; it *follows* reason instead of

leading it. This allows revelation to begin at the midpoint of the story and, in theory, to continue to unfold long after the story is over.

3. Job is designed to unfold in layers.

The third literary device used in *Job* is **layering**, or *parallelism of meaning*. As we saw in chapter four, meaning in stories is built in four chronological layers: words and symbols, sentences, context, and relevance.

Layering here is not a reference to this four-part mechanism, but to a different four-part structure unique to ancient biblical scholarship. During the time of Jesus, rabbis read the scriptures in a series of four layers that were meant to take the student from the domain of context to that of relevance.²⁰⁹ Those four rabbinic layers are:

1. *Peshat* - the **literal** meaning of scripture.
2. *Remez* - the **typological** meaning.
3. *Derash* - the **metaphorical** meaning associated with the midrash.
4. *Sod* - the **revelational** meaning, perhaps available to a student only through a spiritual experience of connection to and with God.

Like the layers discussed in chapter four, these rabbinic layers are intended to unfold chronologically. In a sense, they are like Russian nesting dolls. What you see at first is only one doll, not four. The first doll, being the largest, is a container that houses the other three. But you cannot see the other three until you take the first one apart. Only then does the second doll, in this case, the *remez*, reveal itself. But the *remez* doll, the typological meaning of the story, is also a container for another layer of meaning, a third doll which only becomes visible when the *remez* is deconstructed. In the same way, the third doll, *derash*, is another container inside of which you

will find a fourth and final doll, *sod*. This last doll is one piece; it can only be opened by the Author of the story.

The point here is that in order to understand the book of *Job*, we must begin with a literal interpretation of its story, which means we must take seriously the context of its opening. Chapters one and two describe a spiritual reality that is essential to the story's ultimate theme: *wisdom is found in principle, not power*.

The reason many miss this theme is probably a reluctance to embrace the implications of a literal interpretation—i.e., that Satan and the “sons of God” as they appear in the divine council of the book’s opening are real beings and not just metaphors. For modern readers, who may dismiss the possibility of a spiritual realm, it is easy to leap to a typological or metaphorical interpretation of the opening frame before the story’s literal meaning can be reckoned with.

The story’s types and metaphors do not work outside the container of its first doll, a literal story about a literal man being tormented by a literal Satan. Likewise, commentaries on the book of *Job* often seem to begin their analysis of the book as if it intends to be a purely theoretical exercise from the get-go. This is a mistake. *Job* is a story before it is theology—before it is even poetry. Obviously *Job* need not be one or the other. It is simultaneously a story and a theological exploration.

So how *do* we begin to understand the story of *Job*? And what makes its heaven-earth dynamic so vital to grasping the context of scripture?

The Story of Job

The first six verses of *Job* establish Job’s righteousness, the scope of his great riches, and his concern for the spiritual well-being of his ten children (seven sons and three daughters),

whom he suspects may be living unrighteously.

This short introduction is the story's opening bookend. Dramatically, it functions as a prologue rather than a first chapter. It gives us context for the civil war that's about to erupt in heaven.

And we need that context to understand what happens next, when the narrative shifts to pull back the curtain of God's divine chamber.

We are *not* given an imaginative glimpse of the heavenly realm. We're given no scenery or image-based description of the setting. Instead, we're shown the relational three-way conflict between God, his "sons," and the Adversary, Satan. This is by design. *Job* may feel wordy in places, but it is careful not to give sensory hints about heavenly details. Presumably, some scenes are too holy to be conjured creatively in the mind's eye.

This doesn't mean we can't imagine aspects of this divine drama. It just means the conflict is purely conceptual. It is limited to dialogue and exposition. Even in the shift from earth to heaven, all we're told about the spirit realm is that the sons of God "came to present themselves before the Lord (YHWH), and Satan also came with them.²¹⁰"

Here, I think, is where the temptation to prematurely shift gears into a typological or metaphorical interpretation usually occurs. When we try to imagine heaven, we can't help pulling from other stories—often cartoonish in nature—to set the stage for what's happening. The mind wants to paint something in the background, but the narrator of *Job* offers nothing for the mind to work with. The results (wisps of cloud, a giant throne, a Zeuslike figure with suns for eyes) can be absurd. Modern readers naturally pick up on this, and just as naturally reject it. But instead of taking the absence of concrete detail as a sign to avoid even trying to imagine God's presence, we tend to leap away from the realm of story and directly into the domain of doctrine;

internally, we go from from images to concepts not just as vehicles for the narrative, but as modes of interpretation.

This isn't what the story intends when it shifts from earth to heaven. But because we've already made that premature interpretive leap, we are unprepared for what follows, *which is still dramatic in nature*. By this I mean that what happens in this divine council is best understood as an unfolding story.

God's sons have come before Him. *And Satan came also with them!*

When Darth Vader walks into the room, we know something bad is about to happen. When Shakespeare's Iago opens his mouth to speak, we know that something evil will spew forth. And when Voldemort appears embodied before Harry Potter, we know that dark magic will soon follow. Academic arguments over whether this character is *the* Satan of all of scripture (as most Christian theologians have believed for most of church history²¹¹) or just *a* satan/adversary (perhaps the more common view among contemporary scholars) blur when the story is read dramatically.²¹²

Satan is *the* villain of *this* story, and he is God's to deal with. It is therefore God, in the very next verse, who confronts Satan with a direct question: "Where have you come from?"²¹³

Whenever God asks a question, it is for the benefit of someone else; he already knows the answer. In this case, the question is probably meant to create revelation in the hearts of the "sons of God" and in the hearts of those hearing the story of *Job*.

That revelation comes in the form of Satan's answer: "From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it."²¹⁴

It is a mistake to take this answer, or any satanic answer, at face value. He is a liar.

Which means we must consider the dramatic context of his words. Satan has come *with God's*

sons. And even God's spiritual sons—translated by the NIV as “angels”—do not have unlimited authority over creation. Instead, at least some of them have been given *limited* authority over specific geographical locations²¹⁵. So when Satan says that he comes from “roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it,” he is probably boasting of his usurped authority over earth, or over the human kingdoms of the earth. He is also being belligerent and evasive.

GOD: Where have you come from?

SATAN: Anywhere I want!

What makes this a revelation is that through it Satan demonstrates the contrast between his own nature and God's. God asks a direct question. Satan answers with pride and deception. The sons of God are now witnesses, a fact that is highlighted when God next reveals what Satan has temporarily avoided saying.

Unfortunately, the next verse is often translated as: “Have you considered my servant Job?” Which makes it sound as if God is the one starting this fight.²¹⁶ More than one commentary has made the point that this confrontation was God's idea. But the dramatic implication here is that Satan came to this family dinner with a specific accusation in mind. In fact, Young's Literal Translation phrases God's question like this: “Hast thou set thy heart against My servant Job because there is none like him in the land, a man perfect and upright, fearing God, and turning aside from evil?”

God knows where Satan has been and what he has been planning, and this question is a way of revealing the truth to those watching.

What follows is perhaps the most important line in the book, and the contextual key to not just the story of *Job*, but to much of the Bible. Satan answers, “Does Job fear God for free?”

This question is not just an accusation against Job. It is an accusation against God

himself. Job is not the primary target. This isn't about whether a man can be good or not. It's about whether God's authority is based on his power or on his character and principles.

In saying that Job is only loyal to God because of God's protection and blessing, Satan is saying—in front of the other sons of God—that the creator of the universe rules only by power. God is not God because he is good, but because he is strong. And, presumably, how is that any different than what Satan claims for himself?

Understanding this accusation is vital to understanding the story. In suggesting that God only rules by power, Satan has effectively stripped God of using his power to support or protect Job. The very accusation creates a dilemma.

Can God create a law so big that He himself has to obey it? Is there an idea so big that God doesn't remember anything before it? That answer is love. Love is the object of unusual size.²¹⁷

God now has three possible responses:

1. *God could simply crush Satan under the divine fist.* This is what we wish he would do because we are on Job's side. But this inclination—our desire to counter falsehood with force—only serves to prove Satan's point, that humans are allied to power, not principle. More importantly, if God does this, he will be giving credence to the accusation. Crushing Satan would only solve the problem of Satan; it would not solve the problem of his reverberating lie. Hitler's time in prison resulted in *Mein Kampf*.

2. *God could ignore the accusation.* Some might argue that God should do nothing, that his greatness—if it is really so great—should not be threatened by anything. But this response fails to consider the widening circle of damage such lies create. When you ignore Hitler's ideas in their formative stage you end up facing them when they are backed by armies and secret police. No one really believes, when watching *Othello*, that the villain Iago can simply be ignored. Satan's lie here in *Job* is every bit as powerful as the one in the Garden, *Hast God really said—?* It

must be dealt with or its ripple effects will spread. Better to refute it at its source—for the sake of his “sons” and of all creation.

3. God can let the accusation be refuted by Job. Which is to say that God can accept the challenge in order for the lie to be defeated. He can withdraw his power and allow principle to stand on its own, naked in the face of a horrifying evil.

The third option is the only viable one, since it is the only one capable of revealing the satanic lie as false. Unfortunately, the struggle will involve an enormous amount of human pain. In this sense, Job will become a champion for principle, for the character of God, and for the nature of the conflict between good and evil. In his own way, Job is more gallant than a knight rising to defend a lady’s honor, for Job cannot strike back, and he is all but unaware of the nature of the battle he is being called to.

This set-up is pure storytelling. It gives evil due credit for ingenuity and twisted cleverness. But it also establishes the oppositional strength of real goodness, which lies not in the abilities of a superhero or the talents of a gifted protagonist, but in moral purity and integrity of character—in what we might call virtue.

In choosing the third option, God’s nature is further demonstrated when he refuses to be the agent of satanic suffering. He will not strike Job, but he will withdraw his power from the board. This fact is not a way for God to wash his hands of his involvement; rather, it is the beginning of a revelation concerning his core nature—his “ways.”²¹⁸ Satan is holding a usurped authority over the Earth, so God withdrawing his protective power will leave Satan free to bring out his cruelest torments. It is not God who afflicts Job, but Satan:

“Have you not put a hedge around him...and blessed the work of his hands? ... But strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.”

The LORD said to Satan, “Very well, then, everything he has is

in your hands, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.”

This understanding of authority forms the contextual backdrop for a reality of which Job’s life is merely a microcosm. Some might object that God should be able to remove satanic authority as well as any possibility of widening falsehoods on the simple basis that he is God. Why doesn’t he just take back the dominion Satan enjoys, regardless of whether or not it was given to him by God or Adam and Eve?²¹⁹

But this question is another way of appealing to God’s power to avoid dealing with his nature as the unchanging one who cannot deny himself. Whatever we imagine God capable of, the story of *Job* is describing a conflict involving beings with real characteristics and traits that must not be dismissed arbitrarily. Satan’s authority originated with God.²²⁰ Removing that authority requires the violation of its original terms; otherwise Satan’s lie here in *Job* is magnified. Indeed, his lie may be intended to create just this situation. So the ultimate refutation of Satan’s claim that power is greater than principle must be played out in an environment where both principle and power are allowed to collide freely.

With this challenge, then, Satan has removed what he sees as his primary obstacle, God’s manifest power. Power will now be the exclusive purview of the satanic kingdom, at least in terms of this particular conflict over the afflictions of Job. Power is, after all, Satan’s defining external trait.²²¹

What follows are four satanic attacks in which Job’s servants are killed, his livestock stolen, and all ten of his children die during a feast when the oldest brother’s house collapses. These calamities are reported by messengers who describe, in order:

- 1) an attack by Sabeans,
- 2) fire falling from the sky,
- 3) three Chaldean raiding parties, and

4) a mighty wind that strikes the four corners of the eldest brother's house.

These details are evidence for the first literary device mentioned previously. *What happens on earth is a reflection of what has already happened in heaven.* Job has been turned over to Satan, with the limitation that the man himself not be harmed²²².

Notice that the activity of Satan is manifested here through both human agents (Sabeans and Chaldeans) and natural phenomena (sky-fire and wind). Note also that it is a *human messenger* who calls this fire from the sky the “fire of God.” The narrator makes no such claim. Instead, these words may be intended to turn Job’s heart against God. Later we will see the same thing repeated, with Satan’s prosecutor accusing God of the very things Satan himself is orchestrating.

In spite of all of this suffering, we are told at the end of chapter one, “In all of this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing.”

But Satan is not finished yet, and in the next chapter we are taken back into the divine presence to hear Satan expand his previous lie from one man to all of humanity. The reason Job did not break, Satan argues, is that humans are inherently selfish; their allegiance is ultimately to their own flesh: “But stretch out your hand and strike his flesh and bones, and he will surely curse you to your face.”²²³

Again, God defers, withdrawing his protection further. Job’s *body* is in Satan’s hands, but again, *his life must be spared*.²²⁴

It is Satan, not God, who in verse 7 afflicts Job with “painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head.” Only now does Job’s wife add her famously biting rebuke, “Curse God and die!”—leaving Job alone in his torment.

Once again, Satan’s afflictions have come through both natural phenomena and human agency.

It would be a mistake to move on from Job's wife too quickly here, to dismiss the narrative as anti-feminist because her words are intended dramatically to be seen as another twisting of the knife. Job's wife is not the devil, and must not be seen as one. But if the context of scripture is taken seriously, we have all been agents of evil at times—and usually at the worst times, when we are at our lowest and most vulnerable. It is when we are hurting that we lash out, often at those who are nearest and most capable of taking it.

Writing off Job's wife as some cartoon tempter or Faustian turncoat reveals a failure of the imagination and of human empathy. This woman just lost all ten of her children and any hope for financial security. And now she is watching her husband in grotesque physical torment. Anyone who has seen a loved one go through intense suffering ought to be able to sympathize with her anguish. It is possible she senses that the only thing keeping Job alive is his loyalty to God, and her words to him in verse 9, "Are you still holding on to your integrity? Curse God and die!" are spoken through tears of misguided but very human compassion. The Hebrew for "Curse God" can also be translated, "Bless God."²²⁵

Job of course refuses, though he still thinks all of this suffering has originated with God, and stubbornly refuses to charge God with wrongdoing, as if he senses there must be more to the story of his misfortune than he currently sees.

And indeed there is.

Job has become the embodiment of a story pattern that is built on the fabric of reality. The question at stake for Job is the question all of us must answer at some point: *will we love principle more than power?* Or, again, *Is God good if he isn't good to me?*

Satan's answer is that all humans are ultimately allied to power, even in the midst of our worship services and quiet devotionals. His accusation is "skin for skin!" And he seems to be

right—at least most of the time.

The Church has historically envisioned God in three traits of extreme power: *omniscience*, *omni-presence*, and *omnipotence*. While these conceptions are true, they are not derived primarily from the story of scripture but from doctrines that aim to see beyond our experience and into that realm where the “sons of God” would gather. They do not derive from our experience of the world, or from our experience of God in the world. We know God is everywhere, but do we really *experience* him everywhere? We believe he is all-knowing, but do we *behave* as if he is all-knowing? And we confess that he holds all power in his hands, but do we really see the power brokers of this world building God’s kingdom? Or do those with the money and the microphones use their resources to satisfy their own desires and oppress anyone who opposes them?

In this world the naked power of politics and prosperity is mostly concentrated in the coffers of Babylon. It is the strength of Leviathan’s neck that keeps him from turning with God. It is his vast and unyielding power that crushes everything in his path.

In short, the context of creation under the curse of satanic dominion was a disconnection of power and principle.²²⁶ With Satan at the helm, all power would break loose, unmoored from any controlling ethic, creative restraint, or holy objective.

This does not mean God is not powerful, nor that Satan found a way to somehow make God less than God. But the book of *Job* is trying to show us a reality we cannot see with eyes clouded by power-lust. We want God to be powerful because our allegiance is to power, and we want to call what we love *God*. We don’t want God to be principled because we know we don’t live by principle. And God’s standards are as pure and uncompromising as the sun. So we call God *omnipotent* when we should be proclaiming him *omniprincipiati*, the all-principled one.

In his book, *The End of Christendom*, Malcolm Muggeridge recounts an interview he conducted with Anatoli Kusnetsov, a Russian science fiction writer who had defected to the U.K. during the Cold War. Muggeridge had lived in Moscow for several years and witnessed the oppression of the Russian church first-hand.

If when I was a young correspondent in Moscow in the early thirties you had said to me that it would be possible for the Soviet regime to continue for sixty years with its policy of doing everything possible to extirpate the Christian faith, to discredit its record and its originator, and that after this there would emerge figures like Solzhenitsyn speaking the authentic language of the Christian, grasping such great Christian truths as the cross in a way that few people do in our time, I would have said ‘No, it’s impossible, it can’t be.’ But I would have been wrong.”²²⁷

What then, Muggeridge asks, is the source of the Russian church’s great flourishing in a place where it should have been destroyed utterly? Kusnetsov answers:

If in this world you are confronted with absolute power, power unmitigated, unrestrained, extending to every area of human life--if you are confronted with power in those terms, you are driven to realize that the only possible response to it is not some alternative power arrangement, more humane, more enlightened. The only possible response to absolute power is the absolute love which our Lord brought into the world.²²⁸

During the Cold War the Russian church refused to pit their own pitiful power against the vast and unrestrained power of the Soviet empire. Instead, they turned to principle, the real “power” of God that reveals his true nature. God *is* love.

Or consider what happened in Beijing on the 5th of June, 1989, when Chinese tanks rolled into Tianamen Square to crush a student protest. One unidentified man, carrying a bag of groceries, stopped in front of that line of tanks and refused to move. Western cameras caught the image and spread it across the globe. Here was a David and Goliath moment where David did

not even have a sling. Principle in the form of one man's naked courage stared down Power embodied in a line of rolling Type 59 main battle tanks. And Principle won.

That, ultimately, is the message of *Job* we have such a hard time believing.²²⁹

But Job did believe it. Even when he had good reason not to.

At the end of chapter two we are told that Job's suffering is so great it draws the attention of his three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. They arrive to comfort him in his pain and grief but are so overwhelmed by the magnitude of his afflictions that they merely sit with him for a week, saying nothing.

Job and His Friends

Here is where the opening frame²³⁰ ends and its inner, earthly sections begin. A comprehensive review of these middle chapters would likely not help us understand how *Job* establishes context for God's story. Nevertheless, it is worth pausing briefly to unpack the main function of chapters 3 through 27, which present a debate over the cause of Job's suffering, with Job alone defending his integrity and his three friends taking turns trying to convince him to repent.

The gist of the friends' arguments is that *God uses power against the wicked*,²³¹ so Job must be wicked or he would not be suffering. Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar make increasingly harsh accusations throughout this section as Job refuses to accept their advice and admit to crimes he has not committed.

Job's response to their deterministic logic strikes at the core of their humanity: "You see something dreadful and are afraid²³². ... My integrity²³³ is at stake."²³⁴

His friends are terrified that the universe may not be ruled by a God who punishes the

wicked and rewards the righteous. They need to believe in a universe governed by absolute justice, even if that belief is not mirrored in reality—even if their belief causes Job additional pain.

Ironically, their arguments are not uncommon in the church. We have a tendency to oversimplify suffering, and the book of *Job* takes its time in addressing the emotional damage such dismissive attitudes can cause.

It is possible, perhaps even likely, that the book is doing something else here as well, something revealed through its narrative device of **reflection**. However, the function of this initial dialogue between the four men will be best understood later. Because of the story's chiastic structure, what's happening with Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar won't be clear until we recognize what's happening with Elihu.

For now, an expanded diagram of *Job*'s chiastic structure may be illuminating. Notice the chiastic pairings:

- A. Job & God | Sacrifice, Household
- B. God, Sons & Satan) | Confrontation
- C. Job & Friends | Temptation**
- D. Interlude | Wisdom and the Fear of the Lord
- C'. Job & Elihu | Temptation**
- B'. God, Job & Leviathan | Confrontation
- A'. Job & God | Restoration, Household

The Interlude

As David Dorsey points out in *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*, Job 28 probably represents the chiastic center of the story, and is a kind of authorial commentary or “coda.”²³⁵

Chiastic structure allows for some interpretive flexibility. This is consistent with good storytelling in general, and the storytelling of the Old Testament in particular. Didacticism is the enemy of depth. Ambiguity, on the other hand, invites the participation of the audience. Things that are not presented with complete certainty are likely to be pondered longer and discussed more deeply.²³⁶ Uncertainty leads to imbalance which leads to a desire for exploration and answers.²³⁷

Three things are worth noticing in chapter 28.

First, the repetition of the question, *Where can wisdom be found?* in verses 12 and 20. The chiastic responses include, *Not in the land of the living* (v13), *nor with Destruction and Death* (v22). It is not in the sea, and not in the earth. *God alone knows the way to it.* Earth and sea are types that will shortly be reflected back in a way that reveals the contrast between God's ways and Satan's.

Second, the mining imagery that is found, in some detail, through verses 1 - 11, are figurative explorations of earth's hidden places, and these images too will recur later as the story unfolds.

Third, the summation of the Ode to Wisdom found in the last verse of chapter 28 is almost certainly the book's explicit theme: "And God says to man, the fear (trust) of the Lord is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding."²³⁸

These are the very characteristics Job embodies in the prologue and has continued to embody, if a bit shakily, during his suffering.²³⁹

Elihu: Whose God is He?

After the interlude, Job continues his lament for three chapters, ending with a final

appeal to his own innocence.

He is answered in chapter 32 not by any of his three friends, who have “stopped answering Job, because he was righteous in his own eyes,”²⁴⁰ but by a new character who has apparently been listening to this lengthy exchange all along:

But Elihu son of Barakel the Buzite, of the family of Ram, became very angry with Job for justifying himself rather than God. He was also angry with the three friends, because they had found no way to refute Job, and yet condemned him.²⁴¹

At this point the story’s chiastic structure points to Elihu as a counterpart to Job’s friends, except that Elihu has not been named as one of them, has appeared suddenly out of nowhere, and shows no signs of friendship. In fact, almost immediately Elihu demonstrates not just a complete lack of empathy, but a hostility that can only be justified in the text by his youthful zeal (32:18-21). It is likely, therefore, that his placement here is initially intended to mirror the function of Job’s friends as his accusers.²⁴²

Scholars have attributed various roles to Elihu, including that of scribe, divine advocate, and heavenly prosecutor. These are hard to support from a dramatic perspective. Furthermore, they all seem to miss the real timbre of Elihu’s words. If we do not feel the sting of this young man’s arrogance and cruelty, it probably means we have not fully empathized with Job’s deep anguish of soul and physical torment.

Imagine you’ve just lost all *ten* of your children. Your life savings has been stolen and your business has burned to the ground. You did not realize your insurance policy had lapsed, so there will be no rebuilding, no replacement of your lost income or wealth. Worse, your physical body is suddenly covered in “boils” that may indicate syphilis, leprosy,²⁴³ or something even worse. And now your best friends are publicly accusing you of terrible crimes based only on their assumption that you *must* be guilty because otherwise you would not be getting what you

deserved.

After all of this, a nineteen-year-old seminary student demands that you to listen to him because *God has given him knowledge of right and wrong* (32:9), plus *he was born with extraordinary understanding* (32:8). Also, he has a *right* to speak to you however he wants because he has very strong *feelings*, (32:19) and *his* words come from an upright heart! (33:3)²⁴⁴ Listen up, Boomer, and Elihu will teach you wisdom! (33:33)

The ear tests words
as the tongue tastes food.
Let us discern for ourselves what is right;
Let us learn together what is good.²⁴⁵

If nothing else about Elihu's speech is alarming, this line from verse 34:4 should be. Elihu is echoing the serpent's lie in the Garden of Eden. Elihu is not a divine prosecutor, but a devilish one.²⁴⁶

Furthermore, we must understand that the dramatic tension of this story does not lie primarily in the opening chapters. Satan's gambits in chapters one and two are only a prelude to something worse. The story doesn't bleed away its tension through a slow processing of Job's misery. It builds in intensity as the first hammer-blows of disaster give way to more precise calculations of torture.

Job is still suffering here in the confrontation with Elihu. He isn't looking back on his pain; his pain is all around him. He still carries the boils and the grief and the bewilderment. From his perspective, the agonies are all happening now. The story, in other words, isn't over. Its tension isn't gone. Everything in Job's life is getting worse.

If we miss this, we will miss the dramatic significance of chapters three through thirty-eight. What happens after the first two chapters of *Job*—the bulk of the story—is not the

aftermath of Job's pain but its dramatic climax. And like any good storyteller, the author of *Job* has saved the most terrible confrontation for last.

Elihu is a tool for Satan's last temptation. He is a mouthpiece for the Adversary, who is even now using him to try to break Job in the darkest moment of his life. And he does so in the midst of a lengthy series of accusations against both Job and God, each of which is best understood in light of Elihu's role as a satanic accuser:

Since God cannot do wrong, the wrongdoer must be Job. (34:10-12) This obviously excludes the possibility of a different acting agent, in this case Satan, the one we are explicitly told is the real culprit. Elihu dresses up his accusation in religious terminology, but his theology is reductionistic and deterministic in content, and unbelievably cruel in nature. It is also a tacit condemnation of God, whether Elihu intends it to be so or not, because we know (and Job knows) that Job is innocent. If Elihu is right, then God is justified by his power, not his principle.

God will not let you have your day in court. (34:23) You may want to see him, but he has no need to see you. He will judge you from a distance without ever giving you a chance to respond or even understand. Again, Elihu is describing a God not of justice, but of unquestionable sovereignty, a God not of right, but of might. Not by accident is this accuser named Elihu, which has been translated, "Whose God is he?"²⁴⁷ Furthermore, the conclusion of the story clearly demonstrates that this statement is wrong.

You sinned openly, so God is punishing you openly. (34:26-28) God punishes people "where everyone can see them, because ... They caused the cry of the poor to come before him..." In other words, your public punishment is proof of your crime.

Why would God reward you with relief when you refuse to repent? (34:33) The demand to repent of a sin Job has not committed in order to buy God's favor is appalling.

If only God would cause you to suffer more! (34:36) Elihu's self-righteous condemnation of Job lacks any human compassion. Suffer *more*? What else could Elihu possibly want to happen to this man?

Job is rebelling against the God of power! (34:37) Not only is Job a sinner, but he is accusing God of misusing his power! Who is Job to question the god of power?

God is unaffected by the good and evil done on earth. (35:8) Your wickedness only affects you, Job, and your righteousness only impacts other people. It doesn't touch God. He is too far off.

God does not answer when people cry out. (35:12-13) He pays no attention to it.

Why would God listen to you, when everything you say is empty? (35:16) Elihu is accusing Job of speaking in arrogance and ignorance—as if Elihu himself is not ignorant of God's ways. How galling this must be when Job is the only one present who actually knows how innocent he is.

Elihu's words can't be false because he is perfect in knowledge. (36:3-4) How lucky Job is to have been graced with the presence of a young man who already knows everything and never makes any mistakes!

If you will just repent, and thereby agree with my argument, your torment will cease. (36:11) All of your suffering can go away. Just say the words. Agree with my conception of God as a God of power, and you will spend the rest of your days in prosperity! This offer dramatically signals an offer of compromise, a way for Job to buy his way out of his current suffering by agreeing with Elihu's (and Satan's) premise, which will ultimately result in a denial of the value of principle/integrity.

You are evil, and would rather stay evil than get relief from your suffering! (36:17-21)
Perhaps the coldest verses in Elihu's inhuman emotional rant.

God is exalted in his power. (36:22) *Power is how he governs.* (36:27-31) *The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power.* (37:23) Whose God is he? Mine. He is my God, Elihu's God, the God of Power.

The irony here is that Elihu is correct. His god *is* a god of power. But his god is not the God of the opening frame, not the God Job has been appealing to. His god is not God. Leviathan is his god, “the king of all who are proud.”

Satan is still at work in this story, still acting through human agents, and his selection of a young man filled with emotion and self-righteousness and religious zeal is the perfect choice for exacting the most agonizing existential torment from Job.

It is also significant that, as Robert Alter points out, the poetry of Elihu is “vastly inferior” to everything else in the book.²⁴⁸ In fact, it represents a deliberate contrast with the poetry of God in chapters 38 through 41. While contemporary scholars, including Alter, attribute this disparity to the Elihu chapters possibly being later additions, it is more likely an artistic flourish of characterization. Good storytellers create distinction in their characters’ dialogue. That Elihu’s poetry is bad is to be expected. His artistry is as malformed as his theology.

Furthermore, none of Elihu’s thirty different references to God is the personal name (YHWH)—an omission Stephen Vicchio puts down to Elihu’s “divine plan” theology.²⁴⁹ But again, a more direct explanation seems likely. Elihu is mirroring the Adversary in the opening chapters, who similarly calls God only by his universal name.

Still, the most striking thing in these chapters is what Elihu *does* say. His arrogance and cruelty are breathtaking. If anything could push Job away from God, it would be this. If anything could tempt Job to compromise his integrity, it would be a youthful prosecutor in a clerical collar, appearing just in time to defend God against Job’s wickedness.

Dramatically, this interpretation is demonstrated in the way the scene acts as yet another *reflection* of what came before: Job’s council of friends is a mirror image of God’s divine council of spirit-sons. Just as God has been figuratively stripped of power by Satan’s lie, so has

Job been stripped of power by Satan’s hand. Just as God has been accused by the Adversary, so Job is being accused by the Adversary’s agents. What happens on earth has, in some fashion, already happened in heaven.

One day the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan came also with them²⁵⁰.

And one day the friends of Job came to present themselves before *him*, and Elihu came also with them.

This reflection is now revealed as a mirror not just of what we have already seen—i.e., Satan accusing God and Job in the divine council—but of what we can’t see as earth-bound creatures. If Job’s friends are reflections of the “sons of God,” are their accusations echoes of discontent in the divine presence?

This question is worth asking, even though a definite answer is impossible. We’re not told directly what the sons of God might be saying. All we have are the words of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar. We hear through a glass darkly. But we do hear. And what we hear may not be uniquely human.

From Job’s perspective there’s only one response to the false accusations of Elihu, and only one answer to his demands for a compromise.

Job ignores him.

And God ignores him.

But the LORD answers Job.

Behold a Wonderful Hippo!

And so we come to God’s answer—if you can call it that—which he delivers out of a storm. Again, God is heard but not seen. The LORD is clothed in earthly raiment, a disembodied

voice that speaks not to Elihu or (for the time being) to Job's friends, but to Job himself.

His answers are mostly questions, beginning with the first one, "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?"²⁵¹

G. K. Chesterton makes the point that God has opened court with a very procedural question: he is effectively saying, *State your name for the record.*²⁵² But it is the phrasing of his question that inspires my imagination. In his ignorance, Job has *darkened God's counsel*. His words have mischaracterized God's true nature as far less beautiful and glorious than God really is. And who is Job to diminish the goodness of God?

Though much of God's response is worth exploring, it is not immediately relevant to understanding the context of scripture. However, a few short comments are in order.

First, some of God's questions imply a direct contradiction of the divine nature as understood by Job, his friends, and Elihu. That is, God is *not* far off. He *does* pay attention to what happens on earth. He *is* involved intimately with his creation.

Second, in places God denies specific statements made about him previously, such as that he sends the clouds to punish men (37:13), when in fact he sends clouds as water jars to satisfy the thirst of dry ground (38:37-38). This example may seem a small thing, but it proves not only that he is paying attention to every statement and accusation made against himself and Job, but also that he is particular about particular truth. *Almost* true is not the same thing as *true*. *Sounds right* doesn't mean *is right*.

Two chapters of such details, presented as questions, are enough to show Job that he hasn't really known or understood God's nature. What he has known in theory from a distance is so far exceeded by God's reality that Job is left nearly speechless (40:4-5).

But God is not finished with his cross examination. "Would you discredit my justice?

Would you condemn me to justify yourself?" (40:8).

This seems to be the critical point, for it addresses a flaw common to humans throughout history. When life asks us the question, *Is God still good if he is not good to me?* most of us answer, *No!* Because we measure the universe by the moral standard of our own preference and comfort, any God that doesn't serve our perceived self-interest cannot be trusted, and cannot be good. So we make assumptions about the nature of life, the nature of the world, and even the nature of the spirit realm. We darken God's counsel with words without knowledge.

This tendency is probably what God is addressing when he points Job to the two creatures of chapters 40 and 41, Behemoth and Leviathan.

Perhaps no aspect of the book of *Job* has been interpreted more wildly than these two enigmatic beasts. Creationists have tried to link the traits of these creatures to dinosaurs. Greg Boyd places them together in the camp of mythical chaos creatures.²⁵³ Scientist Hugh Ross follows the more traditional interpretation popularly noted in study bibles and says Behemoth was probably a hippopotamus and Leviathan a crocodile.²⁵⁴ Some have claimed that, whatever their identity their fearsomeness renders them embodiments of God's sovereign power—so what God must be saying here is that if Job can't stand before the power of Behemoth and Leviathan, what business does he have slinging accusations at their maker?

None of these interpretations accounts for the dramatic chiastic structure of the story, nor fully explains the extraordinary contradictions of their differing traits. Behemoth is nothing like Leviathan. These creatures are not twins. They are not even complimentary examples of God's power. Behemoth and Leviathan are *contrasting* visions of ultimate reality.²⁵⁵

Unraveling their significance requires use of the second and third literary devices, chiasmus and layered meaning. For starters, notice how the presence of God, the "sons of God,"

and Satan in (B.) are mirrored in (B').).

- A. Job & God | Sacrifice, Household
- B. God, Sons & Satan | Confrontation**
- C. Job & Friends | Temptation
- D. Interlude | Wisdom and the Fear of the Lord
- C'. Job & Elihu | Temptation
- B'. God, Job & Leviathan | Confrontation**
- A'. Job & God | Restoration, Household

Scholars have long pointed out that Satan seems to disappear after chapter two. But, as we saw with the young Elihu, Satan does not disappear. He is merely reflected.

Reflection is necessary here not to hide Satan but to honor the image of the unimaginable God of creation. God cannot be expressed adequately in creation. It would be unthinkable for the author of *Job* to attempt to conjure an image of the Almighty. Until Christ, the best any storyteller can do is point to creation itself and say, “That tree, that mountain, those stars—all are shouting the glory of God!”

This is why God does not tell Job, “Look at me!” but instead says, “Behold Behemoth. . . . He is a beginning of the ways (works) of God.” (40:15,19).

Behemoth, then, is not God. He is a beginning of the *ways* and the *works* of God.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. To understand *Job* chapters 40 and 41 we need the rabbinic layers that are meant to move us from the context of the story to its relevance in our lives. We need *peshat*, *remez*, and *derash*.

Peshat - the literal meaning of Behemoth and Leviathan.

In the literal reading, Behemoth and Leviathan are awesome creatures, Leviathan a fearsome sea monster (and pagan god²⁵⁶), but Behemoth a mysterious

counterpart, unknown historically to us or anyone else, and therefore a riddle. The word *behemoth* is related to the word for *beast* or *ox*.²⁵⁷ For this reason, and because its descriptions seem to fit (what other grass-eater lurks “under the lotus?”), I imagine Behemoth as a hippo. But as we will see later, if Behemoth is a hippo, it must be a wonderful hippo indeed. This hippo is what God tells Job to “behold.” It is likely this “hippo” which elicits his statement in 42:3-6 that he has now seen God and so understands that he was speaking of things “too wonderful” for him to know.

Our understanding of Behemoth and Leviathan should not end with literal images of a hippo and a thrashing sea monster. Instead we must dig deeper to uncover the riddles contained within their descriptions.

Remez - the typological meaning of Behemoth and Leviathan.

Behemoth is *a beginning of God’s works* (40:19), which God “made along with you” (40:15). At its simplest typological level, therefore, Behemoth is presented as another name for earth.²⁵⁸ In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.²⁵⁹ This can be readily seen in the parallel contrasts of earth and sea in the Interlude of chapter 28, as well as in God’s initial response to Job in chapter 38. The first questions God asks are all centered on the earth and the sea, and they are arranged in parallels of paralleled parallels. Verses 38:4-7 describe the earth; 8-11 describe the sea; 12-15 return to earth; 16-17 return to the sea and its death connotations; and 18 is a summarizing verse focused conclusively on the earth.²⁶⁰ Typologically, therefore, each of the “hippo” descriptions are really playful riddles with more than one legitimate meaning.

16 What strength lies in earth’s life-generating womb!²⁶¹

17 Its tail, the moon, moves slowly, like a cedar.

18 Its mineral deposits are like bones.

19 Its Maker will one day stand upon it with drawn sword.

20 Wild animals play on its skin.

- 21 It is present even under the waters.
- 23 It swallows the Jordan through its mouth, the Dead Sea.
- 24 It cannot be moved or snared by any human effort.

This interpretation is also hinted at in the last book of the Bible. In Revelation chapter 12, John describes a dragon from the sea (Leviathan) pursuing a woman and spewing a river from its mouth. That river is swallowed by the earth.²⁶² And following the last judgment in which the devil is thrown into a lake of burning sulfur,²⁶³ John describes a new earth *without any sea*,²⁶⁴ and therefore without a typological representation of Satan.

Leviathan is Behemoth's counterpart, separated from him as the seas are separated (divided) from the dry ground in Genesis 1:9. Leviathan's description is longer than Behemoth's, and each detail is likewise ironic in the sense of carrying multiple meanings. Expounding on the riddles embedded in chapter 41 would require more space than we have here, though much of it relies on the absurdity of trying to manipulate water through force or persuasion (*Can you put a cord through his nose? Can you fill his hide with harpoons? Who can strip off his outer coat?*). And Leviathan's physical descriptions are probably best understood as bird's-eye views of the ocean: his teeth are rocky shores, the rows of scales on his back are waves, his snortings are fog and his flames the reflected light of sunrise²⁶⁵, etc. More importantly, all of Leviathan's traits are external, while Behemoth's are both external and internal. We can see into Behemoth, but not Leviathan.

But once again, the playfulness of a typological understanding of Behemoth and Leviathan is not the deepest meaning embedded in the story. For that, we need to open the next nesting doll and peer inside.

Derash - the metaphorical meaning of Behemoth and Leviathan.

Where the typological interpretation of these creatures paints them as competing *works*, the metaphorical sees them as embodiments of conflicting

ways. Behemoth is *a beginning of God's ways* (40:19), and Leviathan is a revelation of Satan's.

Behemoth is not just a picture of God's good earth. Each detail also points to a characteristic of God that stands in contradistinction to that of Leviathan, and to our human expectations. God is powerful, yes, but he does not glory in his power. Like a hippo submerged among the lotus leaves, he is present but hiding. The animals play near him. In the book of *Exodus*, God swallows up the Jordan. The God of the universe cannot be manipulated or tempted. **The LORD is a God of principle, a God of relationship.**

In Leviathan, Satan is not opposing God *per se*, but God's *ways*. Satan is not big enough to stand in opposition to the Creator. He is only capable of opposing his ways, and the lie, "Does Job fear God for free?" is a clear demonstration of this.

Leviathan, then, is a metaphorical Satan, and each descriptor is appropriate for who Satan is. *His scales allow nothing to pass between* (and his scales are actually "pride").²⁶⁶ Leviathan is *stiff-necked*.²⁶⁷ Significantly, *he doesn't even fear to come before God!*²⁶⁸ He *crushes everything in his path*. He is *hollow*. He *presides over the arrogant and is king of all that are proud*.²⁶⁹ **Leviathan is a god of power.**²⁷⁰

It is structurally significant that Job's concluding answer to God follows this contrasting revelation of Behemoth and Leviathan. In fact, Job repeats God's initial question before answering:

"Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?"
 Surely I spoke of things I did not understand,
 things too wonderful for me to know.
 My ears had heard of you
 but now my eyes have seen you.
 Therefore I despise myself [or "it"]
 And repent in dust and ashes."

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Now my eyes have seen you—but how? Has the narrator forgotten to mention this

supreme encounter? Or are we meant to understand that in seeing God's creation—God's *works* and God's *ways*—Job has indeed seen the LORD in the only sense that any human possibly could?

Are we meant to realize that Job has beheld a truly wonderful hippo—Earth as it is meant to be, restored to the control of the only one who is worthy to rule it, the One whose sovereignty is not based in power? The One who, when passing before Moses, described himself in terms not of power but of positive ideals—indeed, of *relational* ideals:

The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...²⁷²

The book of *Job* is the essential context of scripture. It forms a spiritual backdrop of history from the Garden to Golgotha. Its great significance lies in its dramatic unveiling of the divine conflict that has shaped the affairs of earth.

Will we choose power, or will we choose principle?

That is the question we must answer on our way to meeting God.

It is the question that has been asked of every person of God, every follower of Jesus, from Adam and Eve to the end of the age. And every person except Jesus has, at some point, answered it wrongly. Every patriarch, every saint, every human icon of biblical virtue has failed. Power has corrupted, and devout power has corrupted devoutly.²⁷³

We have all believed the lie that we would use power for good, if only we had the chance. But when we are given that chance, we sooner or later prove our claim to be false and our allegiance to goodness exaggerated. The very best of us eventually fail, a fact to which the entire Old Testament is a monument:

Joseph delivered the ancient world from famine, then “reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other.”²⁷⁴

Gideon delivered Israel through faith, then built an idol from the profits of his own greed.²⁷⁵

Elijah called all of Israel to repentance, then killed a hundred soldiers with the power of supernatural fire.²⁷⁶ (Clearly, Jesus didn’t approve.²⁷⁷)

Even **Moses**, the man who most ably represented the authority and power of God to the world, ultimately failed²⁷⁸ to do so accurately.

The list could go on and on, but why bother?

It wasn’t just Moses who struck the rock. We’ve *all* struck the rock! We’ve all sold out and built idols and called down fire on our enemies. And most of us did so not because someone held a gun to our head or offered us a billion-dollar contract. We have sold out far cheaper: for convenience, for comfort, for a delusion of self-righteousness.

Thankfully, God’s kingdom is not ushered in through power. It is ushered in through principle, through the relational ideals that lie at the heart of the language of Story²⁷⁹, the ideals that point to a God who knows and wants to be known.

All of scripture shouts this. But these shouts are God-shouts, which means they are loud like a sunrise. They are subtle even in their insistence; revealed best through a still, small voice rather than a wind, earthquake, or fire²⁸⁰. The God-shouts of scripture speak peace to the storm²⁸¹ and truth to every power.²⁸² They are truly wonderful in their hippo-ness. And once you see them hiding under the lotus, you cannot unsee them, nor do you want to.

From Zechariah’s startling declaration, “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the LORD,”²⁸³ to Paul’s revelation from Jesus, “my power is made perfect in weakness,”²⁸⁴ the Bible is setting the stage for a great revealing of Christ as the all-principled one.

Some day the angels and the people of earth will rejoice that Jesus has finally (finally!) “taken [his] power and begun to reign.”²⁸⁵

And we will all join together to celebrate and proclaim, “You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power.”²⁸⁶

Yet there remains one more glimpse behind the curtain that must be addressed in order to understand—or at least to not misunderstand—the story of *Job*.

If “Now my eyes have seen you” is pointing to Behemoth as a typological and metaphorical representation of God’s *works* and God’s *ways*, then Behemoth is more than a wonderful hippo; it is the earth Christ will one day return to both in power and embodying the underlying principles by which he governs the cosmos.

But Behemoth must not be mistaken for God himself. Otherwise we fall into the same error Job’s friends did and end up aligning not with the Creator, but with a list of attributes. This is surely not what the writer of *Job* intended. Such might be “wisdom” but it is not what Job has asked for.

I will not say that this is the *sod*, the revelatory interpretation of the book of *Job*, because, as Clint Eastwood once said, a man ought to know his limitations. Yet I will point out that what should be the most obvious dramatic point made by the story is one that is almost always overlooked as a mere structural convenience.

God meets with Job.

Here at the end of the story Job finally gets what he’s been asking for—an audience with the living God. None of his friends have asked for or even *wanted* such an audience. Elihu has denied that such a meeting would even be possible. In fact, the only person in this story who

seeks a relationship with God is its eponymous hero.

Job has been wrong about God, placing blame where none exists. He has fumed, lamented, and even accused the Creator, but he has not walked away. He has not given up. He has continued to relate to God even under the most extreme duress. It may be hurtful to scream and yell, but screaming and yelling are signs of connection. A strained relationship is, after all, still a relationship.

This relational quality in the story is perhaps its most important revelation, for it is not focused on a single man or even on humanity. Instead, the climax of the story is a meeting—a conversation—between Job and Yahweh (God’s personal name, YHWH) concerning the nature of God as “God” (Elohim).²⁸⁷ Yahweh speaks to Job as a person. He is not, as we have so often alleged, a mere collection of attributes. That God is the ultimate North of our moral compass and the fixed standard of our story ideals is not the most important point. What matters most here at the end is that Yahweh is a person Job is invited to know. God’s relational nature is the common thread of every positive ideal, of every principle.

This too is mirrored in the story at its very end as the storm clouds literally and figuratively disappear. Job’s property is returned to him, and in each category but one his wealth is doubled. Where he had seven thousand sheep at the beginning, at the end he has fourteen thousand. His lost camels, three thousand in number, are in the end replaced by six thousand. And his oxen and donkeys are similarly doubled.

The oddity of this doubling lies in the strange fact that Job, who has lost ten children to death, is given ten, not twenty, more. A superficial reading of this can be perplexing, as if the writer imagined Job and his wife could be comforted by a one-to-one replacement. But any parent knows this isn’t the case. No child can be replaced.

Furthermore, of the ten new children only three are named—Job's daughters, Jemimah, Keziah, and Karen-Happuch. The males are not named.

Both of these facts are startling reversals of our expectations. Whenever a story upends the normative we can be sure it is trying to tell us something.

Job's reward has indeed doubled, for the ultimate destiny of God's people is not finite but eternal. Job's lost children will not remain lost. He will see them again, and when he does, when the story draws its final curtain closed, Job will count not ten children but twenty.

Here at last is where the story of Christ comes most into focus for anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear. G. K. Chesterton came close to spelling it out:

But in the prologue we see Job tormented not because he was the worst of men, but because he was the best. It is the lesson of the whole work that man is most comforted by paradoxes. Here is the very darkest and strangest of the paradoxes; and it is by all human testimony the most reassuring. I need not suggest what a high and strange history awaited this paradox of the best man in the worst fortune. I need not say that in the freest and most philosophical sense there is one Old Testament figure who is truly a type; or say what is prefigured in the wounds of Job.²⁸⁸

It is no accident that the book of *Job* ends with a feast, with Job's family and friends giving him silver and gold, with the naming of daughters and the restoration of his kingdom.

The best stories, the truest stories, are not the ones that end in misery but those which remind us of the restoration of all things—and the goodness of the One who has promised to make our suffering both meaningful and temporary.

And so Job died, an old man and full of years.²⁸⁹

So ends the book of *Job*.

But the story of Job goes on.

11

Resolving the Impossible PLOT

The supernatural cosmology of *Job* is not just essential context for understanding the Old Testament. It is also necessary in understanding the mission of Jesus and what happened on the cross. One reason Evangelicals tend to miss the significance of the Bible's dramatic structure is that we haven't interpreted its story in its proper context. We treat the story of Jesus as if it were happening in a spiritual and cultural vacuum, against a physical backdrop that might be used in a church drama, or a CGI green-screen of Middle-Eastern terrain.

But that contextual whitewashing isn't our only obstacle to reading the story as a story. In separating the entire arc of the Bible into smaller stories and verses that at best function as anecdotes or lessons for sermons, we have disconnected the act of resolution from the conflict it is meant to resolve. We haven't understood that the story of Jesus is the re-creation and fulfillment of the story of Israel. Our doctrine-first approach has lifted Jesus out of history and reimagined him as a mechanism for salvation.

To fully explore the unfolding life of Jesus as the narrative arc of the Old Testament—to really understand the plot of the Bible—we need to deal with three paradigms that have blinded us to a story-first reading of the gospel.

First, we have removed the villain of the story. We tend to read the Bible as a two-

party narrative arc that pits fallen humanity against a redemptive Creator. While this is certainly an aspect of the story, it is a terrible oversimplification of the main plot of scripture that removes the dramatic power of what's really happening. Instead of the plot unfolding as a series of Disasters and Dilemmas that involve all of creation, including the fallen angels and their chief rebel, it reduces the entirety of history to a series of tensionless and disconnected individual Dilemmas: *Have you made a decision for Christ? No? Well, you should. Yes? Good; someday in heaven you'll be glad.*

The main conflict of the Bible is a clash between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. It is not a *Man vs. Man* story but a *God vs. god* story. Jesus didn't come just to deliver humans from sin—though such deliverance is included in the larger Story Goal. Jesus came to redeem all of creation, to take back the devil's usurped authority over Earth.

Though the motif of spiritual warfare is rarely given its full due, the biblical narrative could in fact be accurately described as a story of God's ongoing conflict with and ultimate victory over cosmic and human agents who oppose him and who threaten his creation.²⁹⁰

Modern and post-modern theologians have tried to make the Bible more progressive, more rational, by explaining away its miracles and its spirit beings. They have said that miracles were the result of mass hypnosis, that demons were just misunderstood psychological afflictions, and the virgin birth was lifted from mythology. Unlike the sophisticates of contemporary religion, ancient peoples were credulous. First century Christians meant well, but they were too primitive to understand that when Jesus was being tempted by Satan in the desert, he was probably hallucinating as a result of not eating for forty days. And anyway, the conversation he had with the Tempter isn't meant to be taken literally, but instead is an example for all of us to follow: we must say "No" to bad things and "Yes" to good things. And isn't that a nice lesson

for the messiah to have left us?

This sort of reading requires the dynamite and sledgehammers of higher critical theory, deconstruction, and what C. S. Lewis described as “chronological snobbery.”²⁹¹ Perhaps the only thing more astonishing than how widespread such interpretations are is that ordinary believers still accept them.

The Bible doesn’t work as a story if the villain is removed, just as *The Lord of the Rings* wouldn’t be an interesting story without Sauron, and *Robin Hood* wouldn’t work without the Sheriff of Nottingham.

Yet we continue to misread and mis-plot the scriptures because we’ve accepted *a priori* the claims of materialists that their reality is *the* reality, that the universe is a sterile place of energy and matter and nothing else, and only an idiot would talk about the devil being real.²⁹² For five hundred years the protestant church has been telling itself that belief in a spiritual tempter was just plain medieval.²⁹³ *And can we really bring ourselves to believe that?*

The second reason we are blinded to the main story arc of scripture is that we’ve viewed it from the privileged position of the aftermath of the cross. We take for granted the way the story unfolds; in fact, we are so used to the happy ending of the resurrection that even on Good Friday we fail to recognize the heavy holiness of what it represents. We don’t consider the cross without the resurrection.²⁹⁴ Consequently, we don’t appreciate the story’s resolution, what J.R.R. Tolkien described in his essay, “On Fairy Stories,” as the “eucatastrophe” of history.²⁹⁵ Those who haven’t witnessed the ravages of polio can’t fully appreciate its eradication.

The lostness of the world before Christ was exponentially more terrible than we’ve imagined it to be. We haven’t wrestled with the depth of our problem, the utter brokenness of

everything before the messiah came to deliver us. Humanity was bereft of hope and doomed to a hellish existence of unceasing torment and demonic servitude. We were prisoners in a worldwide concentration camp, waiting for our turn in the gas chambers, without even the possibility of an Allied liberation.

Understanding this situation, the inexorable bondage into which humans were born, lived, and died, is crucial to the story. From the garden to the cross Satan *dominated* the Earth. Every kingdom belonged to him. He even claimed Israel, and in the wilderness boasted to Jesus about his ownership of the chosen people.

Note that the temptation here appears to surrender the very Story Goal of heaven into Christ's hands: *Is this not what you have come for?*²⁹⁶

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours.”²⁹⁷

We cannot reasonably interpret this as a lie. For one thing, it is doubtful that Satan would believe he could deceive God. More importantly, if it were a lie it would not have been a temptation.

But we need more than a rational understanding of what it meant for all of humanity to be held in the irresistible “grip”²⁹⁸ of satanic power. We need to feel the helplessness and despair of that reality.

This is what the apostle John expresses in the book of Revelation²⁹⁹ when he describes his reaction to the book’s central image:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break

the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.³⁰⁰

Though some scholars have interpreted this scroll in the hand of God as either the Book of Life or a list of the coming apocalyptic plagues, it is better seen, at least from a dramatic standpoint, as the title deed to Earth.³⁰¹

The scroll held out in the right hand of God is sealed by seven seals, probably the seven spirits of God, which is a symbolic way of indicating that the authority behind the deed to Earth is attested to by God himself. Earth's dominion derives from him, which is what makes Satan's position so strong. Adam and Eve handed over their authority and now there is no one capable of taking it back.

Even God cannot just take it back by force, for as we saw with Job, this would be tantamount to God disowning himself. If he were to take the world back through force, he would be opposing his previous judgment—a contradiction that would make the satanic lie ("You only rule by power") resonate through eternity. Instead there is a sense of, in the words of Irenaeus, "fair play."³⁰²

No, the cosmic resolution of God's story will not come as a matter of brute power but as a matter of *worthiness*.

John has seen, at the end of chapter four, that the Lord God Almighty is worshiped by the living creatures around the throne as *worthy*. Why? Because, in their words, "you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."³⁰³

Creation shouts the worthiness of the Creator! But this is not the question faced by humanity. The question that lies at the center of the gospel is, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?"³⁰⁴

Who is worthy to reign over Earth? Whose dominion is “worthy”—that of power or of principle? If principle, then who will save humanity from the dominion of the satanic realm?

“But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.”³⁰⁵

This is what prompted John, the disciple Jesus loved, to weep and weep. No human ruler, no angelic guardian, no Marvel superhero would be coming to save us.

God’s good Earth and all of his human image-bearers would, for all eternity, be cut off from his life and redemption and rulership.

Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”³⁰⁶

It is into this space of soul-crushing despair that the Hero of the biblical story arrives. The Lion of Judah has come! The power of all powers, the mighty one of old, the perfect and flawless Creator is about to do what cannot be done. He will take back the title deed of earth using not force, not violence, not supernatural wrath, but innocence. “Thus, at the cross, we are shown what it looks like for “power-as-control” to be replaced by “power-as-compassion.”³⁰⁷

This—*this* is the eucatastrophe of heaven!

And it is demonstrated in a profound and shocking reversal of images that perfectly captures the reality of the crucifixion. For no sooner is the “Lion of Judah” announced than he appears:

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders.³⁰⁸

All of creation expected deliverance through the power of the Lion, through his divine claws and fangs. Instead, he appeared as a helpless and humble Lamb.

A Lamb born to be slaughtered.

A Lamb about whom a new song is sung, a song of worthiness based not in creation but redemption.

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.³⁰⁹

That we don't appreciate the startling significance of this reversal of images demonstrates we haven't appreciated the enormity of our doom.

The third reason we miss the main story line of the Bible is that we have bifurcated what should be an integrated arc of two twining threads into separate and seemingly unrelated plots, the *incarnation* and the *atonement*.³¹⁰

The Eastern church places at the center of its theology the *incarnation* of Christ. This emphasis highlights the importance of community and is reinforced by the dominance of Easter rather than Christmas as its primary holiday. That a theology focused on the incarnation would make the atonement its biggest celebration is not a contradiction. Holidays are when we take a break from that which usually occupies us. They are when, for just a few days, we do something different.

But even while this emphasis is driving home the mystery of "God with us," of the *Logos* connecting heaven and earth in a flesh-and-bone body that is simultaneously human and divine, it is dismissing as secondary the *telos*, the fulfillment or endpoint, of that duality. The bifurcated East understands better than the West that, "God so loved the *world* that he gave his one and only son..."³¹¹ What they tend to miss is the second half of that verse and its significance to the individual: "...that *whoever* believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."³¹²

This is not to say that the Eastern church has somehow missed the gospel message. But the gospel cannot be unraveled into two separate threads without the story being lost in the process, which is why Protestants are almost always just as biblically un-storied.

The Western church centers its theology around the *atonement*, the death and resurrection of Christ as the substitutionary sacrifice for our sins. Western Christians have concentrated so hard on this plot that many pastors see “justification by faith” as a complete description of the gospel message.

A salvation culture does not require The Members or The Decided to become The Discipled for salvation. Why not? Because its gospel is a gospel shaped entirely with the “in and out” issue of salvation. Because it’s about making a decision.³¹³

This is why the major celebration in the West is not Easter but Christmas. The nativity occupies about the same proportion of our biblical thinking as does “Silent Night” or “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” For most of the year we are consumed by the crucifixion. Only in December do we remember the shepherds and the manger.

While this is helpful in highlighting the necessity for individuals to be born again in order to see the kingdom of heaven, it misses the worldwide scope of the main story line. Evangelicals in particular have placed so much emphasis on “decisions for Christ” that we have missed what this sort of reductionism ultimately creates. Only recently have we begun to recognize that in the past century we’ve made many converts but very few disciples. Our half of the bifurcated story allows us to see that “whoever believes in him shall not perish,” but hides from us the starting point that, “God so loved the world.” We miss that Jesus didn’t just die for us individually; he was sent to us collectively.

This disconnection of the atonement from the incarnation lies at the root of our inability to see the conflict and resolution of the gospel, which is the good news that Jesus has fulfilled the

story of Israel³¹⁴ and ushered in a new way of being. Indeed, *incarnation* and *atonement* might be understood dramatically as, respectively, the *conflict* and *resolution* of the main plot of scripture. And just as a story doesn't work if its main conflict doesn't resolve, neither will a resolution without a conflict be fulfilling. Put another way, without the atonement, the incarnation stands unresolved; and likewise, the atonement is no resolution at all without the incarnation.

But how then does the incarnation of Christ introduce (or, more accurately, *heighten*) the central conflict of the Bible? And how does the atonement resolve that conflict if the conflict is worldwide rather than fragmented, prism-like, into any one individual's culpability for sin?

The answer to these questions lies in the plot of the Bible, which may be seen in a compressed form in the story of the life of Jesus. Yes, the Old Testament is more than just a prophetic shadow of the messiah's incarnate through line.³¹⁵ Still, it is a prophetic shadow, and because of this the whole dramatic arc of the Bible may be seen in the interlinking narratives of *Matthew, Mark, Luke* and *John*. Jesus did not just defeat the power of sin; he also defeated Satan, and in doing so reclaimed the title-deed to earth.

This is what is happening in John's symbolic re-telling of the gospel in Rev 4-11. God's worthiness to rule is initially heralded in the angelic realm (here a mirror of *Job 38:7*, where "the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy"). But that worthiness is called into question as the scroll of earthly dominion is held out. No one is worthy to reclaim earth from Satanic rule. No one has the witness of God himself, God's seven spirits attesting via seven seals to the worthiness of the one who is fit to receive all honor and glory and power.

Not, that is, until the Lamb comes and, with increasing narrative tension, begins to open the seals one by one.

I do not know what sort of sound such seals would make. Perhaps it is only the whisper

of wax lifting from parchment. Nevertheless, the story is told with such gravity that we might imagine each seal as resounding throughout heaven, unclasping with the audible *snap!* of a nuclear briefcase.

John thereby reveals with dramatic intensity the transfer of rulership as, seal-by-seal, Christ's messianic reign draws ever closer.

Snap!—The Spirit of Wisdom attests to the worthiness of Christ, and a crowned rider on a white horse rides out for conquest.

Snap!—The Spirit of the Lord attests to the worthiness of Christ, and on earth the result is world-wide war.

Snap!—The Spirit of Understanding attests to the worthiness of Christ to rule on earth, and economic chaos consumes the nations.

Snap!—The Spirit of Counsel attests to the worthiness of Christ, and the realm of fallen spirits begins to vomit up famines and plagues.

Snap!—The Spirit of Power attests to the worthiness of Christ, and the spirits of the martyrs cry out in anticipation from beneath the altar. *The moment is so close!*

Snap!—The Spirit of Knowledge attests to the worthiness of Christ, and the heavens themselves are shattered, the sky rolls back “like a scroll,” (perhaps revealing the true nature of cosmic reality), and on earth the servants of God are set apart from the wicked.

Snap!—The Spirit of the Fear of the Lord attests to the worthiness of Christ, and all of heaven seems to hold its breath. In fact, John tells us that “there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.” But after this silence, heaven’s sevens are reversed in dramatic parallelism:

—seven angels are given seven trumpets, releasing

- seven plagues in succession, including
- three woes released at the fifth trumpet blast, and
- four riders at the sixth, until “There will be no more delay!”³¹⁶ and
- the seventh trumpet announces the transfer of the dominion of earth to the reign of King Jesus:

The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.³¹⁷

This is the plot of the gospel as viewed from the perspective of the Story Goal, from the end of the timeline. But it is an end we have yet to see realized.³¹⁸ We are still in the chiastic counterpart to the aftermath of the Fall, awaiting the redemption of all things even as Christ waits for his enemies to be made his footstool.³¹⁹

The value of recognizing the transfer of dominion as the beginning of the fulfillment of the Story Goal of scripture is that it reshapes our understanding of the gospel narrative. The story of Jesus, read only as a personal salvation device, raises questions that are so odd to modern readers that we scarcely know what to do with them. The gospel itself becomes a mystery instead of a revelation, and we have no frame by which to understand many of its seemingly odd details.

Why, for instance, do demons continually try to announce the true identity of Jesus as the Holy One of God? And perhaps more baffling, Why does Jesus tell them to shut up? Doesn’t he want the world to know? For that matter, why does he tell those he has healed to keep the miracle a secret? And why does he tell his disciples that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel? Or again, if he was sent only to Israel, why does he travel to the borders of Israel and cast out demons in the nations beyond? Perhaps most baffling of all, why does he pick Judas Iscariot to be a disciple when he knows that Judas will betray him?

We could fill pages with such questions, but there is no need. The answers will make themselves apparent when the gospels—but really there is just one gospel seen from four perspectives—the answers will appear when we understand the life of Jesus as a story. It is a story of the redemption of earth, of the conquest of satanic dominion, through an unexpected mechanism.

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.³²⁰

Notice that these two verses contain both the incarnation and the atonement as necessary ingredients for the reclamation of lost humanity. First he “shared in their humanity.” And why? That “by his death he might break the power of … the devil.”

This fusion of the incarnation and atonement is repeated almost immediately:

For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.³²¹

Jesus would prevail by challenging Satan to express his strongest argument, his right to rule, in its most powerful terms. And that expression would be Satan’s undoing.

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.³²²

Fittingly, Gustav Aulén calls this sort of interpretation of the gospel story and its mechanism of reversal and undoing the *dramatic* interpretation. It has also been called the *classic* interpretation based on the fact it was the primary, if not the only, mode of interpretation for the first thousand years of church history. Today it is more popularly known as *Christus Victor*.

To be clear, I'm not attempting to fully represent that model here. Not only is *Christus Victor* an incomplete understanding of the atonement, it was never fully systematized³²³ (perhaps for good reason) by the early church. Scholars have also pointed out that in some of its forms it seems to ignore the *sacrificial* importance of the cross.

Nevertheless, it is useful to acknowledge that the early church conceived of the gospel not as an algorithm or proposition, but as a story. Their understanding was based on the narrative of Christ's life as the fulfillment of the story of Israel. They did not view the gospel as an equation that could be expressed as $f = J$, or justification by faith. In reducing the scriptures to bullet points and propositional statements we have eradicated the essential conflict and resolution that lie at the heart of our story. Gustav Aulén suggests that this is primarily because rationalist theologians were trying to distance themselves from medieval conceptions of the devil.

There lies behind this criticism a particular view of the nature of theology: an implied demand that the Christian faith must be clearly expressed in the form of a rational doctrine.³²⁴

I confess that I have no such demands, both because the gospel is a story before it is a system, but also because I believe it is a gross misrepresentation of the gospel to ignore the role played by Satan and the demonic resistance.

The church would be wiser to distance itself from the actual devil than to cozy up to him by presuming he doesn't exist.

I know someone will ask me, "Do you really mean, at this time of day, to re-introduce our old friend the devil—hoofs and horns and all?" Well, what the time of day has to do with it I do not know. And I am not particular about the hoofs and horns. But in other respects my answer is "Yes, I do."³²⁵

Though it may sound strange to postmodern ears, the conflict of scripture as revealed in the gospel story is perhaps best understand not from a divine or even a human perspective, but

from that of Satan.

C.S. Lewis did this in *The Screwtape Letters*. More to the point, in *A Preface to Paradise Lost* he argues that the carnal imagination is much more adapted to the nature of the villain than to that of the hero because we have so little personal experience being good, but plenty of being bad:

To make a character worse than oneself it is only necessary to release imaginatively from control some of the bad passions which, in real life, are always straining at the leash: the Satan, the Iago, the Becky Sharp, within each of us, is always there and only too ready, the moment the leash is slipped, to come out and have in our books that holiday we try to deny them in our lives. But if you try to draw a character better than yourself, all you can do is take the best moments you have had and to imagine them prolonged and more consistently embodied in action. But the real high virtues which we do not possess at all, we cannot depict except in a purely external fashion. We do not really know what it feels like to be a man much better than ourselves. ... Heaven understands Hell and Hell does not understand Heaven...³²⁶

So what did the story of Jesus look like from the other side of the map?

What is the gospel when seen from the losing side, with the chessboard turned around?

Might we learn something about the mysteries of both incarnation and atonement by seeing them afresh as Satan did, from a place of both awareness and ignorance—knowing who Jesus was but not precisely what he was up to?³²⁷

We can't know for sure, but the imaginative exercise is worth undertaking, with three simple disclaimers.

First, it must be stated that the church's historic antisemitism has no foundation or support in the gospel story. That the Jews have been targeted for hatred, exclusion, and genocide more than any other ethnic group is evidence not of their disfavor in God's eyes but of their status as God's chosen people. The target on their backs is demonic, not divine.

All manner of people played roles in the rejection of the reign of God and in the killing of Jesus. Describing these roles does not dispute who had final authority with regard to the historical event. The established authority—Imperial Rome—crucified him and bears ultimate responsibility for his death.³²⁸

Second, as with any interpretation of scripture, a semiotic reading of the gospel from the satanic perspective must be taken with a grain of salt. The point is not to stress the specifics of what must have happened but to take in the scope of the larger conflict. Just as a writer of historic fiction might describe the battle or Waterloo from a fictional character's viewpoint and still get the major events of the battle right, so my re-telling aims to use imagined details to convey the big picture rather than the small.

Third, in the account that follows I have used the second person perspective, both because it is an unusual and somewhat unnerving approach to creative non-fiction, and also because I did not want to place my readers, even imaginatively, inside Lucifer's head.

Rather, I have retold the basic arc of the life of Jesus as if we are all viewing it together in the aftermath of the cross, standing hand in hand and gazing into the pit to ask, "Is this the one who deceived the nations?"³²⁹

The Gospel According to Satan

ACT I - Son of David

The sound of bereaved women wailing in the night carried none of the usual satisfaction, none of the ironic and amusing implications of irrelevance. Their initial shrieks of rage and disbelief at the intrusion of the king's men soon gave way to heavy-throated sobs as the

merciless bloodletting of infants began, but where was *he*? That was the question. The answer, which should have been a forgone conclusion, brought home the futility of your effort and spoiled whatever fun might have been squeezed from the moment.

Nothing about that night could be satisfying. Not only had he escaped, no doubt just in the nick of time, but your reaction was prompted by panic at the realization *he* was now embodied, however small and frail, in human skin.

“Son of David” indeed! You might have known that Herod’s lack of subtlety would only produce the fulfillment of prophecy. *“Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.”*³³⁰

That perhaps couldn’t be helped. But the resulting confusion among your lower classes was more than a bit concerning. Were your instructions not clear? Were they not to be followed without question? How many would need to be flogged into submission once again? Making the fear of you more terrible than the fear of him—if that were possible—and as if that weren’t yet another indictment against the Powers.

Of course *he* would arrive in some unexpected way, not in a palace but in a manger, stripped of even the dignity of rank. It was so *like* him, so disgustingly and pretentiously naive, so screamingly pompous in its indifference, so ugly in its false humility. He would write his own story his own way, tolerating no hero but himself, whitewashing every self-centered act as a gift of love, but always taking with one hand what he had first given with the other. Was not life always followed by death? Did he not announce his own arrival as a poor child in a poor home in a poor nation not with messages written in the dirt but with a numberless host of enemy guardians splitting wide the night sky? And if they sang to a band of shepherds, what did that change? Were the vile simpleton flock-herders not his people, thoughtless and uneducated and

easy to impress? Of course the shepherds were overawed—just as he intended! Would they not afterwards spread the news to everyone, giving the lie to his pretense of diffidence?

Your lieutenants should have seen that this was not the time for a violent assault. That would come later. First he must be studied so that his weaknesses could be exposed.

What you did not understand, even from the scriptures themselves, was what he was doing *here*, and *now*, in the here-and-now. Such an invasion—captain of the host enfolded in the flesh of an infant—was altogether too soon and too small to be believed. He must be building up to something larger and more meaningful—a coup against your own lawful rule. Something to do with the temple, his father’s house, and a gathering of the “chosen people” to take back the earth for their king.

Surely he knew it wouldn’t work. Dominion was yours. It couldn’t be ripped away by force. Not by him. That sort of conquest required the cooperation of his covenant people. But Israel had long ago turned against him. They were yours now, like every other kingdom of men.

So you bided your time and watched from a distance in Egypt and then in Galilee as he moved ant-like through boyhood and puberty, undistracted and unhurried, laughing and weeping and so often stopping to gaze at creation, and especially at other people, with that wordless expression you could not read.

He was hiding something, surely.

But could this be used? The fact he was never one of them even as a child? Or the way the people of Nazareth thought him strange and un-boyish? Or that even his own brothers let you twist his compassion into scorn, so that in their imagination he was not the protective big brother who prayed ceaselessly for their well-being but a self-righteous tyrant who reveled in his position as ‘Father’s favorite?’

And who better to drive that wedge inward than his mother, who, knowing better, wove for him a seamless rabbinic robe but could not keep you from assaulting her mind with doubts regarding the past, the present, and the future. You made the most of the old man's words at the temple, Simeon's ringing proclamation that "a sword will pierce your own soul too," and made little of the words that preceded them, that Mary's first-born would be, indeed, already *was*, God's "salvation."

A fool's words straight from the mouth of a wasted life! And who but God would ask for such sacrifice? So you knew what those words represented. You recognized their sawtoothed holiness, felt their ragged edges bite the smoke-heavy air of the temple courtyard, remembered standing once in that place of surging otherness yourself—not in the earthly copy but in the reality of the Presence, its awful inspiration.

And when he went down to the river you supposed he meant at last to launch his campaign of reclamation, that this was the beginning he had been preparing. Jesus of Nazareth, come at last to the age of a teacher, would join forces with his cousin the Baptist and begin to retake the kingdom of Israel village by village.

You were right of course. Any fool might have seen it coming. But you *didn't* expect him to kneel in the shallow water, to subject himself to the indignity of baptism by and through a broken vessel. And how could the Spirit, alighting feather-like on his shoulders, endorse this? How could the Throne itself speak its *pleasure*? Not merely the son of David, but "my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased?"

What could baptism mean to *him*? He'd never felt the lash of sin and of separation. He'd never been rejected as these grunting, sweating, half-breed humans had, never suffered the awful emptiness of the outer darkness.

When at last you couldn't contain your rage at his presumption, you shouted into the void between worlds that this bit of theater might fool the plebes who lined the banks of the Jordan but it did not change anything. He was no more anointed by John, no more fit for earthly kingship, than he'd been before. His baptism was a submission, not an elevation. The crown was still yours. Earth was yours. Israel was yours!

This time you were not ignored.

He heard you, as only he could, and rose dripping from the stream to follow you alone into that arid waste, you far ahead, he trailing you unhurried, like a dog scenting a lost track.

He had answered your challenge. He would meet you in the wilderness on your terms, and though you understood the power at his disposal, you needed to be sure that he would not use it. Not yet. You would not wrestle the whirlwind. But if his rigidity, his sense of fair play and internal non-contradiction indeed prevented him from responding to deception with deception, and therefore to force with force, then all was not lost. And all might even be gained, or at least held indefinitely.

He trailed you until dusk, and when he stopped to rest and light a small fire you stood in the flickering shadows so that by your presence he might be unnerved and find that sleep wouldn't come. Instead, he drifted off almost immediately and you were forced to crouch above him at the crest of a little hill.

Night turned to day and the game continued until he arrived at a stream where he built a lean-to against the sun, as if he knew what you had in mind. But he was the one limited by a human form, so you were content to wait as his spiritual filling—if indeed the ocean could be filled with water—turned to a physical emptying.

Would sonship—communion with the eternal—be enough? Even in the absence of real

food, when his body began to scream its torment and turned inward to devour itself?

Forty days passed before you appeared to him there. You approached with a light step and spoke from behind him and to the left, from the position of power. Not an accusation but a direct and sensible solution. Wasn't he human? Didn't he have needs?

"If you are the Son of God," you said, "tell these stones to become bread."

He was perched on a flat slab of rock, half in the shade of an overhanging crag, head resting on fingertips, elbows crooked against his knees, and he didn't flinch when your words cut the air. "It is written," he said, not even glancing your direction, "'Man does not live by bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

"Yes," you answered. "And is it not also written that he will command his angels concerning you? If, then, you are the Son of God, throw yourself down. Or do you not believe your own promises?"

His hair lay matted with sweat against his scalp and his seamless robe was streaked with dust. But still he would not look at you. "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

You stood before him then, a few steps away, closer than you could ever have come in that other realm where the power and brilliance around him was more forceful than the atmosphere of a billion suns. Then, because he was still not looking at you and you knew it would get his attention, you knelt. He *would* look at you!

When he did finally look up, his eyes flashed. But those eyes were now encased in flesh, and his power lay ensconced behind the wall of his own nature.

"Earth is mine," you said. "And I can give it to you. This facade can be over. I will *give* you the children of Adam. Every nation, every tongue, every tribe. They were given to me, and I

can give them to anyone I want. Why fight me over this? They aren't worth—" you gestured at the rocks at his feet, still decidedly not bread, "—*this*. All I ask is that you bow down and worship me."

For a moment he seemed to waiver. Then, with surprising strength, he rose to his feet. "Enough," he said, panting with the effort. "It is written. It is *written!* 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

His terms, then. His claim to kingship would be based in principle rather than power.

He would abide by what was written.

And that would be his undoing.

You laughed as you flew from him deeper into the wild.

ACT II - King of the Jews

Thereafter you gave strict orders to your *anexártites*, your independent ones, to announce at every confrontation his identity and therefore his claim to earthly authority: *This is the Creator, Lord of the council, the Holy One of God. Of course he demands to be obeyed!*

Your lieutenants mistook this, as you anticipated, as a strategy to challenge divine authority with divine authority. This made sense to them because it was the same case you had been making through the ages. What you had by right from Adam was a kingly writ. But they, the lesser spirits, stupidly believed they could invoke the Name to control the One whose name it was.³³¹ Their resulting humiliation was well deserved.

You, however, were playing the long game. If his claim to earthly dominion could be twisted so that the masses followed him for his God-ness rather than his goodness, his external position as ruler rather than the principles on which that authority rested, then how could he

claim true dominion? Wouldn't that be a tacit admission that his rule was about his swollen self-interest? Could you not claim that anyone who followed him because he was the "son of God," or even the "son of David," was allied not with beauty and truth and goodness, what the Jews called *tov*, but with raw power? Hadn't all history proven this point? The tower? The flood? The plagues unleashed on the children of Egypt?

But of course he would not permit it.

From the moment he left the desert and re-entered a synagogue he refused to allow any proclamation of his true identity as Son, immediately throttling the voice of one who tried to dominate him through magic. Nor would he tolerate any announcement of who he was anywhere unless it was derived from his nature. "Everyone on the side of Truth listens to me," he said once, making Truth, not divinity, the central issue.

Yet his plan—which had been codified by the prophets in alignment with the law of what might be called 'ultimate fairness'—clearly demanded that the earth be conquered by *messiah* as "king of Israel." And how could he be both?

It was written: dominion came to you via Adam and the escaped 'watchers' of the council. Jesus would try to usurp that dominion through a covenant based on faith. That is, an individual's rejection of the natural earthly order for a higher state of dominion. Humans could appeal to the 'higher' laws of the divine council.

But they were all lawbreakers. Which meant they were trapped between the two states, and nothing would change that until your own dominion could be stripped away. Every person acquiesced at some point. All sinned. All submitted themselves to your rule. Even Israel had turned away. Which made his incarnation puzzling.

Why, for instance, did he journey to the region of the Gerasenes to confront Legion, a

captain of no small ability? Shouldn't his jurisdiction have ended when he stepped from the boat? Yet the force of his deliverance slaughtered a herd of pigs!

It wasn't until he went to Tyre to exorcise an independent from the daughter of a gentile woman that you understood he was recreating, re-living, the scriptures. Your personal dual with him in the wilderness had mirrored the exile from Egypt. His sermon on the mountainside, delivered sitting down, proclaimed himself a new and improved Moses. And this Canaanite woman matched and perfected the moment Elijah came to Zarephath asking for bread.

The message this sent grew clearer. Not content to reform his chosen people, he was reaching into the nations where long ago he had given the now-freed watchers territorial authority. He was picking a fight. Provoking you. *Come and get me!*

He would build his church, and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Jesus of Nazareth planned to drive you out just as he drove out the Amorites through his namesake, Joshua. He was building to a physical conquest.

Your lieutenants wanted to kill him immediately, but you prevented them. Jesus of Nazareth was the tree of life. Death would not stop him unless the whole tree could be uprooted and cast out. Before Jesus could be killed, he had to be anointed as king and then rejected by his people. If you could do that, you would remove the Holy One's foothold on earth permanently.

Meanwhile you watched as he taught the masses and his closest followers. You listened as he invited even women and lepers into his closest circle, issued absurd demands regarding lust and anger, and even harsher demands about loving one's neighbor. When he multiplied food, you multiplied the expectations of the crowds. When he healed their bodies, you scarred their minds. When he drove out your independents, you found them new hosts in more strategic locations.

Did he know you had someone on the inside? A man among his closest disciples? Did he understand that you had a piece of every single one of them? That there was not a single disciple you couldn't turn when the time came? And with the slightest bit of pressure—a mocking laugh, the ridicule of a maiden, the coin of a Pharisee?

Even after the whole of Judea seemed to know his name, he had nothing to show for it besides the calluses on his feet and the scorn of his elders. And if all of pressure you brought to bear through the circumstances of his itinerant teaching and healing did not pierce his armor, well, you hadn't really expected it to. You knew him from of old. The point of stirring up petty betrayals and backstabbing gossip was never to break him. It was to hurt him. A splinter under the nail could be more satisfying than an open wound. This was your power, the power of attrition. You had no foothold in the Christ, but he had no foothold in the world. After three years of grasping at the wind his hands were still empty.

How confident were his words even so! And how often did he speak in riddles, darting his taunts in four directions at once: to the crowds, to the scribes, to the disciples, and, lastly, to you. The curious masses, who so often delighted in his parables, gleaned nothing that might have freed from from their bondage to your will. But they did delight when his stories robbed the scribes and Pharisees of their dignity!

You took full advantage of this, elevating him in the minds of both groups—in reality a delightful demotion—to the status of an entertainer, conjuror, political zealot, rabble-rouser, or conquering general, depending on what he happened to be saying or doing.

When he told a story about two men, one wealthy and the other a poor beggar named Lazarus,³³² you focused on the story as an affront to the dignity of the teachers of the law and the comfortably positioned, pointing out that they had worked hard for their money and their

position. With the underclasses you exaggerated the importance of money as an indicator of vice and encouraged their instinct to see poverty as a virtue. Poverty *itself* was a moral good; there was no need to share the little one had with someone who had less.

When he spoke of a man who sowed good seed in his field only to discover that overnight an enemy had sowed weeds alongside the wheat,³³³ you enticed both the crowd and the self-righteous elites to see *themselves* as the sowers of good seed. In this way they missed the point entirely, blinding themselves to your presence as the sower of weeds, and placing themselves in the forbidden seat of judgment. Some of them walked away even more self-righteous than before, as if the story only affirmed the wickedness of their least favorite neighbors.

At times the twisting of his words was made all too easy by his own exacting perfection. A less scrupulous but more canny orator would for instance have chosen as their hero a common laborer or middle-class Jew rather than a Samaritan. But Jesus of Nazareth set up as the standard of right behavior a hated enemy and made the villains of his tale a priest and a Levite.³³⁴ It was child's play to suggest that he had crossed a moral line and set himself up as an agent of foreign gods, or a political ally of Israel's enemies. *Was he suggesting that even a Samaritan, even a Roman, might find favor with the God of Israel? Worse, did he mean that everyone owed a debt of covenantal hesed—of lovingkindness—to every person they encountered? It was outrageous!*

How ironic that his parable of the Sower³³⁵ so clearly delineated what was happening, yet still they missed it—thanks to you! Your “birds” were ever ready to snatch from the mind any seed that might sprout into an awareness of moral degeneracy or spiritual doom. Even the more difficult targets eventually yielded to the pressures of vocation or familial rejection or even sexual frustration. If not, there was always the oh-so-satisfying pressure of pleasure, of twisting a

good until it became, out of context and out of bounds, a destructive force.

But you understood the implications of that parable. And you knew that he understood your understanding.

Perhaps that was why his stories became more barbed, more layered in their capacity to strike not just the heart of the common and the elevated, but at you.

There were times when you force of his pronouncements made your scales ripple in agitation. He spoke as if he knew not just what you were thinking, but what you were *incapable* of thinking. And this was maddening.

If “It is written!” were to be fair, then it must be comprehensive. It must include everything. What then had you missed?

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field,” he said once. “When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went away and sold all he had and bought that field.” You knew who the man was. You recognized the field as the whole earth under your dominion. But what had he hidden? And what right did he have to be joyful? He was not winning. And he had turned down your offer to sell it back to him. How then would he make such a purchase if not through the blood of his followers, the nation of Israel marching again to war under Yeshua, but this Yeshua unhindered by the constraints of a tainted bloodline and the internal chaos of your influence?

You saw it most clearly when he stood in the courtyard of the temple, his presence so filling it that the people inside were drawn to gather around him, close enough to hear but far enough to slip away should the need arise, so that he seemed wreathed in a band of sunlight swirling with dust. You had your captains in tow, and you set them to work in the chief priests, who demanded, “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this

authority?”³³⁶

It was a subtle question, for he would not or could not lie, but if he told the truth he could be charged with any number of blasphemies. More importantly, his claim to authority would become the centerpiece of your campaign against his ascension of the throne of David.

Unite behind this man? Absurd!

He parried the question with a counter-question that set the elders muttering, then told a parable aimed straight at your dominion. *God was a landowner who had planted a vineyard and rented it to some farmers.* Israel, of course, and the priests and the elders couldn’t miss the parallel between themselves as the teachers of the law and the wicked tenants who beat God’s servants who were sent to collect the vineyard’s fruit.

But even as he was speaking to the elders, he was looking at you when he said, “Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?”

The idiot priests did not understand the story at first, so of course they responded with the plain meaning of the story: “He will bring those wretches to a wretched end.”

He was still looking at you, and in the silence that followed, as the elites recognized their own damnation, you understood your victory. If you killed him, he would simply return in power to forcibly remove your claim on earth’s kingdoms.

This was the first truly shocking thing you heard him say. For where then would his precious holiness be? If he couldn’t persuade humanity to follow him because of his “goodness” he would just tip over the board and storm away?

Still, you didn't quite believe it until, leaving the temple and the city, he said as much privately to his disciples: "If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into."³³⁷

You were the owner of that house! And now he planned to come as a thief in the night, supported by enforcers from the Throne, to rob you of a dominion you had no reason to surrender.

At last he'd admitted that his justice was merely another word for power. At last he'd revealed his weakness and hypocrisy. The random misery of life, the cruelty of existence in a plane of cosmic indifference, had finally worn down even the Holy One.

Soon, the chief priests must be persuaded to reject their king. Then and only then—but also *immediately* then—he had to be executed under the law. Everything must be legal. Was it not written? Was all of it not recorded in advance? Was that not the law?

Once, you tried to make him king by force, by way of a crowd worked to passion by your agents. But he knew what you were planning and removed himself before the plot could gain traction.

Very well. You were patient. And when you began to sense the nearness of the moment in the swelling crowds of people who gathered in the streets of Jerusalem and outside its walls for passover, you handled the matter personally. You knew the scriptures—knew what to look for. If you could not make him king, then you would seize the moment he chose for himself. You would recognize what even his disciples might miss. Just as everything else in his life had been upside down—born to a manger, apprenticed to a carpenter, baptized by a madman—so too his anointing as king would also be inverted.

And indeed he *had* to be anointed, for was it not written? He must ride into Jerusalem on

the back of a donkey, but doing so was not enough. He must be king first, certified by the enemy. It was not sufficient to be *announced* as king, for hadn't even one of David's sons been proclaimed and yet dethroned? No, Jesus of Nazareth would have to be anointed as king before he could declare himself.

The moment came in Bethany, in the house of Simon the leper, as Jesus reclined with his disciples and with Lazarus, the one he raised from the dead.³³⁸ All the elements were present, both for the precedent stories of King Saul, King David, King Solomon, and King Jehu, as well as for the messianic inversions of these type-scenes.

When the woman, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, entered the guest-room with her jar of rare spikenard and snapped the neck to lavish it on his feet, you hesitated. Everything about the moment screamed divinity, humility, and *kairos*. But it wasn't until she moved the jar from his feet to his head, tipping out the fragrant sticky oil so that it streamed down his hair and face, that you knew.

The Ancient of Days had anointed Jesus of Nazareth as king of Israel. At the hand of a woman. In the house of a leper.

The Throne had endorsed him at last. Which mean that everything was now legal.

It was written!

The woman thought she was preparing him for burial, because of course she believed him when he said he would be raised to life. But only you caught the double-meaning in his response, his affirmation of the beauty of her faith and the fate her obedience to the Spirit would bring upon him: she was preparing his body for burial. To a real king, death and kingship were synonymous.

The woman didn't understand this, nor could the disciples. Perhaps Lazarus, having

tasted death, might have understood, but at the moment he was thinking only of his astonishment at sitting alive in the Presence.

The moment was lost to all of them, highlighting the messiah's loneliness. His resurrection would be meaningless without the chosen people. And he would not have them, because you would not *let* him have them. A king without a kingdom? A kingdom without a king?

Only he, the Christ, the anointed one, understood this, and the pain of betrayal that lined his face was, in that moment, sublime. He saw you whisper your offense in Judas's ear: *Should not this perfume have been sold and the money given to the poor?*

ACT III - Thief

You were ready for the moment. Everything had been arranged beforehand, so it was not difficult to set the cart rolling downhill. Pontius Pilate had long ago surrendered so much of his humanity to your control that he was now little more than a puppet dancing to your strings. Caiaphas was a more interesting subject and would need a lighter touch, but you knew you could count on his influence to sway the elders who would no doubt vacillate on matters of the law.

The people of Israel were another matter. Not because they were any different from Adam's other descendants—that sea of sweating hobgoblins—but because they had been chosen by him. Any crowd, given the right provocation, could be transformed into a soulless mob. But what if you were not the only one manipulating them? Might the Throne claim its own covenant rights and indulge in a manipulation you couldn't match—just as he had done with Moses back in Egypt? What if his staff once again swallowed those of your puppet rulers?

It was passover, after all, and surely that fact was significant to him. If only you knew

why!

But you did not know, so you waited until the story was told again during the Passover Seder, Jesus recalling each event with characteristic insight and wit—as if he had lived the story himself. When he came to the part where the court magicians flung down their staves, you entered Judas, transforming him from something like polished deadwood to a living serpent. What would the Christ do now? Would he swallow up his own disciple?

Instead he gave a short, ambiguous command: “What you are about to do, do quickly.”³³⁹

You of course complied, for things must happen quickly at this point.

First the arrangements for his betrayal, the silver paid out, the soldiers and officials sent from the chief priests and Pharisees,³⁴⁰ Jesus already in torment in the garden. Clearly he knew he had already lost and was making arrangements with the Throne to burn up the law and attack the Earth in force. Not another flood, unless he meant to go back on that promise too, but perhaps a sea of fire consuming the brokenness of his creation. Another admission of failure.

Then a show trial conducted by Annas and the chief priests under the cover of darkness in the early hours of the morning. Only those elites fully under the control of your independents were summoned. Meanwhile a small beating coupled with baseless accusations would create anxiety and send the message that more, so much more, would have to be endured. You would not make this easy. He had invaded your world, after all. This was his idea.

Another trial, this time before Caiaphas, and the caginess of the high priest’s insight convinced those elders who were still reluctant that Jesus of Nazareth was just one man, after all, and wasn’t it better for one man to die than for the Romans to burn down their nation?

Then at last, as the sun began to rise, the soldiers stood him before Pilate. You were quick to point out the strong odor trailing after him, the smell of spikenard, the aroma of royalty. And

if he didn't *look* like a king, was that not so much more an offense to the mind, if not to Rome?

"Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked.

"Is that your own idea," Jesus asked, "or did others talk to you about me?"

"Am I a Jew?" Pilate replied,³⁴¹ because of course it was you who had been talking to him all along and Jesus knew this. But you needed to press the point, to make it extremely and undeniably clear *why* he was being killed. When he claimed that his kingdom was that of another world, you made Pilate put the question bluntly: "You are a king, then!"

Jesus of Nazareth would not lie to save himself. "You are right in saying I am a king."

From this point forward it was crucial that everything be executed with precision and the point be made with crystalline clarity. You ushered Pilate out in front of the chosen people, who had already been stirred up by your skilled agents, and put the very words into his mouth: "I find no basis for a charge against him. But it is your custom for me to release to you one prisoner at the time of the Passover. Do you want me to release 'the king of the Jews'?"³⁴²

Two prisoners, Jesus, son of the Father and anointed king, and the robber, Barabbas, were presented to the crowd. When they demanded that you release Barabbas, you delayed, ordering instead that Jesus be flogged. This after all would be your first, and likely your only, opportunity to do to him what you had so often desired. More importantly, the point must be driven home again and again, not for the sake of the people but for the sake of the divine council. If his people rejected him as king, what foothold could he claim on Earth? What right did he have to rule? Earth did not *want* him!

He returned staggering, his back flayed open, the wounds seeping in streaks into the purple robe you'd prepared in anticipation of this moment. Your soldiers had pressed a crown of thorns into his scalp and the blood streamed around his swollen face.

“I find no basis for a charge against him.”

Humans were so predictable. Your denial only sent them into a frothing rage. Now they demanded crucifixion. But Pilate, as instructed, refused. Again they demanded crucifixion, this time appealing to their own law and the fact Jesus had claimed to be the son of God.

The beauty of all of this was that the trial was not just a mockery, it was an honest mockery. Nothing aroused your pride more than your ability to deceive with facts, to tell just enough of the truth that whatever remained hidden did not seem to matter. So when Pilate again and again tried to set Jesus free, the people only grew more insistent. And your case against the Throne was made.

One last time Pilate, sitting down, reiterated the plain facts of the case, the dilemma of dominion: “Here is your king.”

“We have no king but Caesar,” the chief priests answered.

And that was all you needed. Pilate handed him over to be crucified so that he would be not only rejected but cursed, and over his head you ordered that a sign be fastened to remind the Throne that all of humanity—even his own people—had rejected him: “Jesus of Nazareth, the king of the Jews.”

On Golgotha they crucified him between two thieves, which was fitting since he had come as a thief and taken the place of a thief and even planned to return as a thief.

You stood by and watched as the hours ticked away and the men on the crosses groaned. When Jesus recited the “My God, my God” psalm you started to worry, for it had not occurred to you that this obscure reflection on David’s life might have resonance here. But when, six hours later, he cried out, “It is finished,” you breathed a sigh of relief.

He was dead, and even the rocks cried out in protest and the temple veil split and the sun

went dark. But you reveled in the darkness.

He was dead! The Holy One of Israel had surrendered himself to you and lost earth forever!

He was dead he was dead he was dead!

Victory secured, you soared above the city and perched on the roof of the temple to ponder what might happen next. Would the sky roll back to reveal a vanguard of archangels? Would your own forces, with nowhere left to hide, slowly be destroyed?

Or might even the archangels hesitate? How loyal would Michael and the hosts of heaven really be, seeing the true nature of the Holy One who was no longer holy? Would Gabriel continue to serve the God who had at last declared himself to be not the origin of deep mysteries but the strong arm of entitlement?

As you gazed out across the city, you recalled your confrontation in the wilderness. He should have accepted your offer. You would have given him all of this, all the kingdoms of the earth, to see him bow down and worship you. And now what did he have?

All the kingdoms of the world were yours. You had dominion over *all* of it. You could do with it as you pleased, unless and until he pried it from your hands by force, and contrary to the nature of the law.

The earthquake had shattered walls and collapsed roofs. Beneath you, the sound of weeping began to rise from the rubble. Torchlight flickered to life down in the streets, and you began to sense the indignity and horror of the Levites inside the temple under your feet.

Recognition began its slow boil in your chest as you saw that earth had, for the moment, become your domain metaphorically as well as literally. You had long been satisfied with the absence of light. Deep darkness, the unpredictability and unknowability of Chaos, where nothing

was known or could be known except the self, had followed in your wake ever since you fled the Presence. Hell was home to you, and home was hell. You were re-making Earth in your image.³⁴³

This was your world, not his. He had no place in it. The fool!

But then, if he had no place in it, why had he allowed himself to be taken so easily? Why had he given up his life as if it were nothing?

You could see him still hanging there on the cross, on the place of the skull beyond the city walls. It was not his world. Why had he come for it?

Slowly the horror of realization took you as you began at last to see the consequences of your own logic. Your gloating turned to panic, and then to blinding rage.

This was your world, not his, you had said. He had no place in it.

But if he had no place in it, what right did you have to kill him?

Then, as you stared out across the darkness of the city, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him. The courts were seated, and the books were opened.³⁴⁴ You could see it happening in your mind's eye as clearly as if you were there, standing before the council.

The voice that spoke into your darkness was like a thousand voices united in one, like the roar of water tumbling down a mountainside: "Now the prince of this world will be driven out."³⁴⁵

You were still crouching on the roof of the temple, but a weight had descended on your shoulders, the weight of the world, and before you could respond, the weight pressed you flat against the surface to gaze into the black courtyard below. You opened your mouth to speak but the crushing heaviness stole the breath from your lungs. Instead, you flung accusations from your mind like flaming sulfur: *You deceived me! How can you, the Holy One, deceive?*

Power like a billion butterflies swarmed around you. Something like a garment was stripped from you and when it fluttered free you saw that it looked like a scroll with writing on both sides, sealed with the witness of the eternal Spirit.

“You have deceived yourself.”³⁴⁶

You snarled, the only resistance left to you. *Earth is mine! The kingdoms are mine!*
Dominion is mine!

A second voice, this one like the passing of a distant breeze, said, “The other beasts have been stripped of their authority, but they will be allowed to live for a period of time.”³⁴⁷

The weight lifted slowly, almost reluctantly, and for just a moment you seemed to be staring into the brilliance of the Throne. But it was just the sun emerging from its long eclipse.

“Is it not written,” a third voice asked, “‘only spare his life?’”³⁴⁸

“And is it not written,” added the second, “‘In that day, the Lord will punish with his sword, his fierce, great and powerful sword—’”

But you knew what was coming before you heard it.

You knew because you knew that sword, the sword of his word.

It is written!

“—Leviathan the gliding serpent, Leviathan the coiling serpent; he will slay the monster of the sea.”³⁴⁹

12

The Fourth Man

CHARACTERIZATION

The hardest thing to live with all those years afterwards was that he'd seen the atrocity coming and so had no excuse for his betrayal.

How many days had he watched from a palace window as the massive pit, dug by an army of sweating workmen, went deeper into the soil? Or listened to the pounding of nail in plank as royal scaffolds rose a cool distance from what promised to be an astonishing funeral pyre? Or clenched his teeth as load after load was carted down the earthen ramp and added to the mat of oil-soaked firewood at the bottom?

Like everyone else in the city, he'd seen the statue grow next to the pit over a period of weeks. Its surface blinded the eyes with reflected sunlight, and every evening it loomed a bit taller and more brilliant.

So it wasn't lack of preparation. If anything, he'd had too much time to consider the king's edict: bow down to the towering golden idol or be tossed into the oven. No excuses, no exceptions. Deny the real God—the God of Israel who had rescued him from death once before, and rescued him again from the life of ceaseless toil endured by so many of the king's captives—or die.

Nor was the problem that he hadn't steeled himself for the flames. From the moment of the first announcement he knew what he had to do. Perhaps another son of Israel could violate

the covenant this way. Life, after all, was life. But in his case there was no excuse for it. He had a responsibility to God and to the king, and now both had abandoned him. Something would have to give.

To that end he'd prepared a special appeal, a short speech born of prayer and fasting: *I am your humble servant, and I will serve you faithfully, but if that faithfulness can be purchased with fear, my Lord, then it isn't worthy of you.*

He had hoped, dimly, that such an obvious truth would snap the king from madness. The king had suffered a disturbing dream, a nighttime vision of a statue with a golden head, silver shoulders, bronze belly, iron legs, and brittle clay-and-iron feet, each metal representing a future kingdom, and each kingdom less glorious than the previous one. The golden head was the king's head, his kingdom, and why suffer the fate of fools when he was the king? The great Nebuchadnezzar would change the times and boundaries set by the God of heaven by casting a new idol from a new vision—a better world by royal decree. Diplomats from every nation would swear loyalty to the gold standard, the glorious kingdom of *now*—embodied in a massive idol plated head-to-toes in gold—so that every kingdom would henceforth be the king's kingdom, may he live forever.

Of course it would never work. Even kings didn't live forever, and diplomats would bow to a dog if it were dressed in purple. Yet here they all were, waiting for the royal signal.

Because when the time came he had said nothing. He hadn't even *thought* of speaking.

Instead, the reality of the moment had overwhelmed him.

A workman bowed to the king from the edge of the pit and tossed a flickering torch over the side. Nothing happened at first; then a small tongue of fire breeched the surface, dancing from log to branch to beam, and the furnace coughed a rattling sound like teeth grinding.

Alive with sparks, a dark column of smoke curled skyward. The air tasted foul and oily as a wave of heat surged over him.

Off to his left beneath the scaffolding, musicians bleated a chorus of half-hearted tones before launching their processional. As if in answer, the king's officials and visiting dignitaries fell forward in a human ripple.

Even as he sank to his knees he saw the three young rulers, fellow Jews and captives from Jerusalem, standing upright. Worse, they saw him.

But it was too late. Too late to stand up. Too late to offer his pathetic speech. Besides, who could have heard it above the noise of the fire and the music?

Then the music died away in a sort of strangled whimper and he could see that higher up on the platform the king stood with his hands braced on his hips. Courtiers lined up beneath him, shouting and pointing at the three rebels.

He turned his face away, wishing the moment would end, wishing he would have had the courage to remain standing as Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah were led around a square of prone worshipers and over to the scaffold.

Then he was *glad* he had not tried to make his speech and grateful to be lying here in the dirt and grass instead of standing between those guards, because King Nebuchadnezzar was furious, and there was no way those three young men were going to be allowed to live.

That was the worst of it, the sense of relief. Afterwards he could never shake the memory of his enormous gratitude at having done the wrong thing, the betrayal that made him a traitor but also meant he could lie unseen on a little spot of earth and cling to life a while longer.

The king was raging, his voice almost melodic with lilting fury: "...if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not, then what god will be

able to save you from my hand?"

On the far side of the pit men brought a cartload of wood and shoved it, wheels and all, over the edge. A second wave of heat radiated out, twisting the grass in front of his face. He felt as if someone had stuffed a dry rag down his throat, but he could not now look away.

Mishael spoke, his voice quiet at first and then louder: "... God *will* rescue us from your hand, O king. He will. But even if he does not, we will not worship your image of gold."

Whatever he'd been expecting, whatever his Jewish compatriots had been expecting, the reality of the thing was worse. Soldiers tied their hands and feet and carried them squirming to the head of the ramp and tossed them over. A shower of sparks rose up as the writhing bodies hit the wood, a wave of embers that wrapped the soldiers above in fire and set them ablaze.

Their screams—the screams of those soldiers burning alive—would never again be far from him. But now the blasphemous gratitude was back and he realized he was not the man he had been, was not the man he had thought himself to be, though Nebuchadnezzar was wholly and entirely himself.

He hadn't thought the ninety-foot statue a good likeness, but now he saw that he'd been wrong. The king's master craftsman had understood their master better than he, had seen the king more truly. For the king himself was but an image of the idol, a hollow wooden shell veneered in gold, unmoving and unmovable.

But what did that make him? His prepared speech came back to him and he juggled the words in his mind like hot coals: *if that faithfulness can be purchased with fear, my Lord, then it isn't worthy of you.*

Isn't worthy of you.

No. He wasn't. He never would be. Those weeks of fasting and prayer had been as

meaningless as his own intention, as meaningless as his faith. Where was the God of Israel now?

The king cried out and leaned over the railing of the royal platform. For the space of a breath the flames died down. “Weren’t there three men thrown into the fire?” the king asked. “Why then do I see four men walking around unbound and unharmed? And the fourth looks like a god!”

Four men. There were four men in the fire. And one of them looks like a god. The God of my fathers. The God of Israel. But it should have been me.

It should have been me: Daniel.

This is not the story we know.

Of course I’ve taken liberties with many details, including the narrative voice. But I’m interested in the idea that this imaginative retelling is problematic—the problem being that we don’t see the link between Nebuchadnezzar’s dream of a statue and, in the very next chapter, the building of a real one. Worse, we don’t see Daniel there bowing down with the other satraps when Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah are tossed into the flames.

Daniel bowed down? Huh?

In many circles the idea seems speculative, if not downright heretical.

I believe this is because we’ve been taught to read the Bible as an anthology, a collection of holy fables and moral precepts and puzzling aphorisms. We take a text-first approach that seeks to understand the forest of scripture by analyzing seventeen varieties of pine needles.

Theologian Leonard Sweet explains the problem, which he calls “versitis”:

From my childhood I have accessed the Bible through the template of books (66), chapters (1,189), and verses (31,103). The problem is that this template is alien to the material. The Bible wasn’t written numerically. The Bible was written narratively,

metaphorically, in stories and poems and songs and letters and memoirs and autobiographies and dreamscapes. The original template of the Bible is not numbers, it's *narraphors*.³⁵⁰

The book of Daniel illustrates the scope of our disconnection. I've asked many people who love and study the Bible where Daniel was when Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace. Most answered that they hadn't considered the question. Some said they didn't know. One replied that Daniel was probably on vacation. But everyone looks at me in disbelief when I say he was bowing down to the golden statue along with the rest of the heathen hordes—that he *must* have been bowing down because the story demands it.

Before I explain what I mean by 'the story demands it,' it's worth pausing to consider the textual hints about Daniel being present at the furnace incident even though he isn't mentioned by name:

1. Daniel was the chief administrator over the province of Babylon.³⁵¹
2. All the provincial rulers were summoned to the dedication.³⁵²
3. All the provincial rulers *assembled* for the dedication.³⁵³
4. Everyone bowed down to the statute except Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego.³⁵⁴

The logic of this is so simple it should be hard to miss. But we do miss it because we've been trained to ignore the implied, the subtle, and the metaphorical when we encounter it in the scriptures. Here's Sweet again:

One of the hardest things in life is to see what is right in front of us. Nothing is quite what it seems. There is always more there. Just as we can miss the obvious, we can miss the spaces, the silences, the "what isn't there" that often is as important as what is there.³⁵⁵

We Evangelicals have been desensitized to the scope and power of Story in the Bible. Because our sermons and devotionals and commentaries specialize in dissection, we've only

ever seen the thing splayed out like a frog on a cutting tray, skin peeled back, organs exposed. We rarely see what a living bible story looks like, rarely see one hopping about and splashing in the water.

This is true despite the fact most anyone can understand how stories work. Story, after all, is a universal human language we've been immersed in all our lives. Most people have the basic interpretive skills to understand character arcs and plot twists and implied themes. We exercise some form of narrative interpretation every time we watch a marvel movie or a BBC mystery.

We read "Little Red Riding Hood" with the simple expectation of wonder and horror that characterize all fairy tales. We don't ponder the significance of a red cloak or the Freudian implications of a woodcutter. Instead, we hold our breath as wolfish revelation draws closer:
What big teeth you have, Grandmother!

But we don't read the Bible this way because our anecdotal, verse-by-microscope approach dissolves its contextual meanings—that is, meanings derived from the logic and structure, and more importantly, the emotion, of its stories.

When we disconnect the stories of the bible from the source of their emotive power (which is their composition as *stories*), we blind ourselves to their significance. We should be feeling them as stories before analyzing them as doctrine. Our doctrine should begin with the nuance of story arc, character change, and theme. Which is to say that it should begin at the intersection of narrative and audience: emotion. Neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist writes:

Feeling is not just an add-on, a flavoured coating for thought: it is at the heart of our being, and reason emanates from that central core of the emotions, in an attempt to limit and direct *them*, rather than the other way about. Feeling came, and comes, first, and reason emerged from it...³⁵⁶

This is not just a statement on the origins of mental processing. This is how stories work. It's how they are designed to work because they mirror our experience of life. And because we are wired for Story, and the Bible is wired for human nature, we have the whole process backwards. We have it so backwards that it is almost impossible to recognize the problem without a forced paradigm shift.

It took me years to realize I needed to ask the question, *Where is Daniel when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego are being tossed into the furnace?* I was so used to reading the account as a self-contained lesson on God's faithfulness that I couldn't imagine it as a dramatization of human failure. It took me even longer to understand that Daniel's story arc was much deeper and richer when read as a story of redemption. What's more, this story-first approach highlighted Christ in the text in a way I'd never noticed.

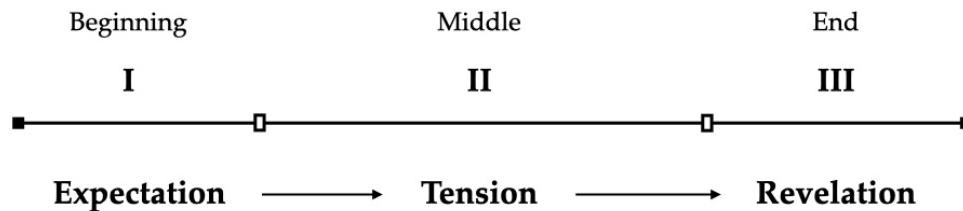
To understand how Daniel's arc indicates a narrative theme without stating it explicitly, and thereby destroying its power of relevance, we only need to recognize its structural signposts.

The primary signpost in the story of Daniel is his character change. "In biblical narrative, action is character, and character is action."³⁵⁷

All stories are about change. They are about more than this, of course, but underlying the common elements of characterization, plot, context, etc. is the necessity that *things matter*. A story in which nothing changes is not a story but a series of events. One might say that the most essential aspect of any story is that, in the end, things are different than they were in the beginning. And the second most essential aspect of any story is that the change we see at the end must happen *because of* what happens in the middle. Stories depict change as a result of identifiable causes.

Thus stories, like life, usually have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Unlike life, this

three-part chronology is reduced to a familiar pattern that we must understand now as causal in nature. That is, a story's Expectation doesn't just *precede* the Tension, it *causes* it; and its Tension in turn causes its Revelation.



The goal of this pattern is not merely to show something happening from a distance.

Stories are not diagrams or how-to manuals. They are not product demos. Stories are emotional journeys, and as such aim primarily to create emotion in the audience. All stories try to make us feel something—and not just any something but a *precise* something. The best stories create specific emotions that serve and reveal their theme. No one laughs at the end of *King Lear*. Instead, the play's feeling of deep and tragic loss undergirds its premise that we make our own torments.

Similarly, when Scrooge finally relents at the end of *A Christmas Carol* and vows to "honor Christmas all the year," we feel the significance of his change. Moment by moment Dickens has been showing us why it is impossible for Ebenezer to remain as he is, a self-centered and lonely old miser. Either he will be destroyed and stripped of his self by death, or he will become good. There are no other options. This dramatic tension creates revelation. Continuing his selfishness will help neither Scrooge nor anyone else, whereas helping his fellow man will break the invisible chains that keep him anchored to the world as Jacob Marley's ghost is. We in the audience accept the "become good" choice as correct long before Scrooge does, and

this fact is a demonstration of the story's emotive power. We care about Tiny Tim and Bob Cratchett and even Ebenezer Scrooge. We want the best for them. And long before we realize it we are secretly hoping Scrooge will change in this specific way, regardless of the cost. Thus, when he changes we rejoice. We feel elation and relief. The tension is broken. And somewhere in the back of our minds we wonder if we are more like the new Scrooge or the old one. That is the story's revelation. What is revealed to Scrooge is, sooner or later, revealed also to us.

So the emotion one feels at the end of a great story is one of the best indicators for discovering its underlying meaning. The tears of a tragedy and the laughter of a comedy are both signposts about what the storyteller intends.

The book of Daniel is filled with these moments of change, both in the longer story arc of Daniel and in the smaller arcs of Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and Darius.

Interestingly, the three young men fed to the furnace have no clear arc. They don't change, and even their moment of courage happens off screen. Their decision to remain standing is only explored after it happens.

The other four main characters have a story arc shaped by their individual flaws. Which is to say that in order for a character to change, they must either go from worse to better (comedy/growth), or from better to worse (tragedy/death).

Nebuchadnezzar is a clear example of what science fiction writer James Gunn called "The Man Who Learned Better" story type.³⁵⁸ The king's triple arc of dream/statue/madness ends in a moment of humility based on revelation. "All His works are truth," Nebuchadnezzar says. "And those walking in pride He is able to humble."³⁵⁹

Belshazzar's arc is simpler and darker. Failing to heed either the supernatural writing on the wall or Daniel's interpretation of it, he dies proud.

Darius the Mede, though vain enough to be baited into declaring himself godlike, at least tempers his vanity with regret. He spends a sleepless night in the palace hoping—perhaps even praying to someone other than himself—that his most trusted advisor will be delivered by the Hebrew God. When Daniel is vindicated by the same *malak*, the same angel, who delivered Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the king orders the court schemers thrown to the lions.

Each of these character arcs is based on a decision that results in change. While these decisions are not central to the story, they are indicators of a narrative theme: True power flows from humility.

The point of these arcs is that they light the path for Daniel's larger and more complex character arc.

It is easy to read the story of Daniel as a series of anecdotes about a spiritual superman. Compared to the kings of Babylon, Daniel is a great man of God, flawless in his knowledge and humble in his demeanor. For years I thought of him as the perfect prophet.

But how did Daniel get so humble? Elsewhere the story shows us that power doesn't instill meekness, but pride. And Daniel walks the halls of power longer than anyone. How then does he avoid the same error that trips up the kings he serves? Why is he able to tell Belshazzar that he needs no gifts or promotion to do his job? Or, more impressive still, tell the king in front of a thousand nobles to repent of wickedness?

The answer is found in Daniel's character arc. To have an arc, a character must begin with a flaw, something that pushes him to a moment of decision.

It is the ability to choose which makes us human. This ability, this necessity to choose, is an important element in all story. Which direction will the young man take when he comes to the crossroads? Will the girl talk with the handsome stranger? Should the child open the forbidden door?³⁶⁰

Daniel's arc is the most complex in the six-chapter narrative that tells his story. He faces four dilemmas:

1. When offered unclean food, Daniel resolves "not to defile himself with the royal food and wine."³⁶¹ Instead, he asks that his vegetarian diet be tested.
2. When threatened with death over Nebuchadnezzar's mysterious dream, Daniel asks the king for time and urges his three friends to pray for mercy. God responds by granting Daniel a vision.
3. When commanded to worship the golden statue in chapter 3, he bows down.
4. When told of Darius's decree about not praying to any god except him, Daniel goes home and prays—with his windows open.³⁶²

It is important to notice that these dilemmas increase in scope and severity. Each one is harder and scarier than the last. Such a pattern creates narrative tension—the driving force of a story's middle section—and the resulting pressure eventually exposes Daniel's character flaw. This is how many stories work; the author cranks the handle of a dramatic jack-in-the-box until the hero's weakness pops out.

So the first test of Daniel's character is a dilemma of pleasure/conformity. It's not a carrot or stick situation. It's a carrot or carrot cake situation. One can imagine the thoughts going through the minds of the four friends: *Where's the harm? What choice do we really have?* Daniel's response is likewise mild but also unusually wise for a young teen: *please test our plain diet. We'll comply if it doesn't work.*

The second dilemma is one of dependance. The king has ordered his wise men to not just interpret his dream, but tell him what it was. Like an agnostic who's seen a ghost, Nebuchadnezzar is probably testing their connection to a spiritual reality he doesn't understand. Their choice is to demonstrate real spiritual power or die as imposters—die scheming or pleading for mercy or trying to escape the palace and the region and the country.

This second dilemma, though it carries horrifying consequences, is not much of a

dilemma, for none of the magi face strong but opposing desires. They all want to live; they just don't know how. "Tell me my dream and then interpret it" is a puzzle only God can unravel. And that of course is the point. Daniel and his friends are center stage for a miracle that ought to give them confidence when the king's ego explodes in the next chapter. Instead, only three of the four stand when the music plays.

This is why I say the story arc demands to be read as one of failure and redemption. If Daniel isn't bowing down to the golden statue then he has nothing to learn and, in story terms, nothing to show us.³⁶³ The account of the fiery furnace is not there to teach Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. It's there to teach Daniel, Nebuchadnezzar, and us.

Us most of all. Because God is not just after changing Daniel or the three kings. He's after the transformation of the whole world. And so often the most significant changes come from failure.

Thus, the moment of Daniel's failure is highlighted by the story as a setup for his redemption. This becomes obvious when the entire narrative is viewed as a whole, with Daniel one of the "all" who bowed down in order to save himself.

Sure, we have our commentaries and sermons and anecdotal dissections. And we have the plain text of the scripture. Yes, and of course the angel in the fire, the *malak* who appears as one of the gods to Nebuchadnezzar, was Christ himself in the flames. Of course he was. We've been told this in a dozen sermons—and an excellent point it is.

But what must have been going through Daniel's mind when he heard the king say, "Weren't there three men that we tied up and threw into the fire? But I see four men walking around unbound and unharmed."³⁶⁴

Four men.

Four.

Was he thinking that the fourth man should have been him?

Instead, Christ took his place in the fire, and for decades Daniel would have to live with that knowledge, with the memories of what he'd seen and heard and done. Worse, he'd have to live with what he'd *not* done.

If anything could make a man humble it is this. Because afterwards Daniel's friends are commended by the king he has both served and, by his silence, betrayed. His friends are promoted for their courage. Yet he, Daniel, still walks the halls of power. He still outranks them, is still advisor to the king. There is no recorded rebuke from anyone, including God, and if there were it could not be harsher than the one he has heard from the mouth of Nebuchadnezzar: *I see four men walking around unbound and unharmed.*

Is it any wonder, then, that when his enemies fashion a law against prayer to any god but the man Darius, Daniel rushes off to pray? Is it any wonder that he flings open his windows? Or goes meekly with his accusers? Or offers no defense for his 'crime?'

Daniel goes to the den of lions as silent as a lamb—as silent as the lamb of God.

Of course he does. He missed the opportunity of faithfulness once; he isn't about to fail a second time. He isn't looking for a way out. Maybe he doesn't trust himself to speak. Maybe he thinks that if he opens his mouth someone will come to their senses and set him free. And he's waited so long for this chance to go back and do what he ought to have done the first time. Back then he would have faced death in the company of his friends; now he will do so alone.

But this is not just Daniel's dilemma. It's the dilemma of every disciple of Jesus.

We see Christ in the flames and so come to understand He has taken our place. But afterwards there is not the slightest rebuke from heaven. We would welcome a rebuke, but it

doesn't come. It will *never* will come. The fiery furnace has burned out. The guilt has faded. The fear of kings and counselors has vanished like the mist it always was. All that remains of the moment is a piercing awareness of the presence of the *malak* in the fire.

God was there, and never more there than in that moment when the flames were hottest.

Off in the distance you can almost hear His voice speaking through the crackling heat:

Whoever would come after me must take up his furnace and follow.

So Daniel, like every Jesus follower, takes up his open-air prayer and meekly follows God's *malak* to a den of not-meek lions.

Ironically, this is probably the shortest night of Daniel's life, for this is when he encounters what he's always beheld from a distance. Seen through the lens of Story, this encounter is the climax of his narrative arc. Here is Daniel's dramatic change and third-act moment of revelation.

All his life, including those years in the palace serving Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar, and now Darius, Daniel has been a conduit for the living God, the God of Israel. He is a great man and a humble man. He is a man of knowledge and extraordinary wisdom. But his relationship to God has always been second-hand.

Oh, he knows God. That is, he knows who God is. God is "the God of my fathers,"³⁶⁵ and "the God of heaven,"³⁶⁶ and "the revealer of mysteries."³⁶⁷ God is "the great God,"³⁶⁸ and "the Most High God"³⁶⁹ and even, "the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways."³⁷⁰

But it isn't until Daniel emerges from the den of lions that his language about God changes. It is here that he embraces what others have been saying all along—namely, that the living God is *his* God.

"Daniel," Darius asks the next morning at dawn, "servant of the living God, has your

God, whom you serve continually, been able to rescue you from the lions?"

And Daniel replies, "O king, live forever! *My God sent his malak!*"³⁷¹

It is easy to miss this change of heart, this change of relationship between Daniel and his God, especially when we read Scripture looking for the presence of propositional truth rather than its presence in the form of a Person.

It is also easy to miss that what happens next narratively—chronologically—when he emerges from the den of lions, is found in chapter 9, which begins, "In the first year of Darius son of Xerxes."³⁷²

Days or weeks after Daniel steps out of his own trial of testing, his own "fourth man" moment, he embraces the paradox of sonship: he has failed his God, but God has not failed him. He doesn't just know about God. He knows God personally.

Chapter 9 is Daniel's prayer of repentance, written in the humility of complete surrender. He has come to terms with his own failure, a failure which mirrors that of all Israel, and discovered that God is willing, even eager, to forgive.

Here in chapter 9 the eighty-year-old Daniel finally address God by his personal name, the name revealed to Moses, YHWH. Daniel has at last moved from knowledge of a universal Creator to intimate knowledge of a Savior. It is thus to YHWH that he addresses his prayer of forgiveness, calling on that name for the *first* time and *seven* times.

And it is in that name—a name with which Daniel now fully identifies—that he places his final appeal:

O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name.³⁷³

Part III

Coda

13

One True Story

THE LANGUAGE OF LIFE

We are image bearers. Like it or not, *intend* it or not, you and I and every other human who ever lived has reflected, directly and indirectly, the divine image in which we were made. One need not be religious to fulfill this purpose for life. The man who rescues a drowning cat from a flooded river has acted out the image of the Creator who loves and serves creation. The agnostic nurse who administers CPR to a heart-attack victim shines forth the nature of the “God of the living.” The old man who tells stories to his delighted grandchildren is imaging something both human and divine, something eternal.

Stories too bear the human and the divine image, even when they aren’t trying to—even when they’re broken or poorly conceived or thematically hostile to God. A story that works as a story will be doing something that, at its most basic level, reflects the meaning of existence.

The Bible is the clearest example of this principle, though like humans it often buries its more difficult revelations so deep that only the most persistent (that is, eager to sit at the feet of Jesus) will ever find them. Perhaps that is why so many have forgotten that the center of our faith is not a set of doctrines or propositional truths but a story, the story of Jesus.

Australian sociologist John Carroll, who does not profess to be a Christian, believes that the reason that the church in the West is in trouble is because it has forgotten its story. In his view the “waning of Christianity as practiced in the West is easy to explain. The Christian churches have comprehensively failed in their one central

task—to retell their foundation story in a way that might speak to the times.”³⁷⁴

Stories reveal both the nature of human existence and the nature of the personal/relational God of Scripture.

The vault at the center of the Bible is Jesus—Jesus the fulfillment of the story of Israel; Jesus the salvation of humanity, who by his blood purchase people for God; Jesus the ruler who robbed Satan of his corrupt authority and reigns forevermore; Jesus the “true human” who shows us what we are called to in the final restoration of all things when heaven and earth will again be united.

The vault at the center of the human soul is the inner holy place where God desires to take up residence as our treasure in these “jars of clay.” Christ is thus the answer to the despair of Socrates that our inner, core self is always alone. So too is Christ the answer to the despair of Solomon that the meaning of life cannot be known from the material universe. Christ is the answer to the despair of every human heart that longs for reality to make sense, for life with all its trials and tribulations to mean something bigger and more important than just eating and drinking and making merry, for tomorrow we die.

Life *is* a story. But it’s a story that must be entered through the doorway of Jesus. *Whoever finds their life will lose it*, Jesus said, *but whoever loses their life for his sake*—whoever joins the story of Jesus, in other words—*will find it*. To follow Jesus is to follow the source, the *only* source, of all meaning. And anyone who follows him will not be disappointed, for he gives meaning to everything, no matter how humble.

It is never too late to join that story. Whatever one’s past, whatever one’s circumstances, the way into meaning is the way of the cross, the way of surrender, the way of letting go of one’s self-significance and yielding to a revelation breakthrough of God’s presence.

As Francis Thompson portrayed so vividly in “The Hound of Heaven,” surrender can seem to be the most difficult thing in the world, and the most unnecessary:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter...³⁷⁵

Yet the “hound of heaven” followed, and keeps on following.

During my doctoral studies my eighty-four-year-old mother fell in her apartment and had to be taken to the hospital. The circumstances of that fall were a little weird, for she didn’t seem hurt by it. But my brother, calling via a video phone he’d installed in order to check in on her periodically, saw that she was lying down on the tiled floor.

“What are you doing, Mom?” he asked.

“Oh, just lying here.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

At this point he was already calling for an ambulance because she seemed “spacey,” and he feared she’d hit her head on the way down. The paramedics found her still lying there, the walker upright at her feet. She had no visible marks on her head or back, but it appeared she had tipped backwards and slammed into the floor without even attempting to brace herself. They asked for, and received, permission to take her to the hospital for bloodwork to check for internal injury.

I heard the story when her bloodwork came back indicating she had a very aggressive form of leukemia that would likely take her life in a matter of weeks. I immediately headed for the hospital, a thirty minute drive, and by the time I got there she had already agreed to start the

treatment.

Because this happened while COVID protocols were still in place, we were only allowed to visit her room one person at a time. I entered just as the doctor was explaining that they had ordered an ambulance to take her to a different location, a research hospital, to begin the chemo.

“Mom,” I said, “I am with you, and I know Barbara and Barney and Dave are with you too if you choose to fight for your life. I don’t blame you. But has the doctor explained what will happen if you agree to this? Has she explained the likely outcome of the treatment?”

“No,” she said. “They just said there’s only one way to beat it.”

My mom was an educated person, a nurse with two degrees and a lifetime of experience in the medical industry. That she hadn’t gotten the whole picture alarmed me.

“This treatment requires isolation. It kills more than half of the people who receive it, and has never saved the life of anyone over sixty. Mom, it has a *zero percent chance* of saving your life, and if you sign the papers, you will be whisked away to another hospital where you won’t be able to see anyone—your kids, your grandkids, your friends, your pastor. Statistically, it’s a death sentence, and in a place where you won’t have anyone you know to be with you. Is this really what you want?”

This was very difficult news to deliver. I watched her expression turn to sheer terror as she realized there was no good option. While she’d believed there was a chance to live, she’d held onto that hope as to a lifeline. But now I had stripped it away.

I sat down next to her. For a long time we listened to the clicking and beeping of machines that measured the various malfunctions of her dying body.

“God caught me when I fell,” she said at last.

Thinking I had misunderstood her, I said, “What?”

My mother and I had a long history of disagreement over the nature of reality, particularly regarding God's place in the universe. She, the daughter of a Lutheran minister, had always seemed to believe that God was not just predictably distant, but decidedly Lutheran. When in college I had described my encounter with Christ and spiritual rebirth, she had not seemed to take it seriously. I was in a phase. I would grow out of it. I would come to my senses. If I wanted to serve God I would do it the right way and enter Lutheran seminary. Though these opinions softened over the years, she had never really seemed to accept my conviction that God still moves in the lives of his people, that he is not out there a million miles away but right here beside us and in us and intimately involved in the daily affairs of our lives, however broken they may seem. To my mother, "God with us" really meant something like, "God is *for* us, generally speaking."

Thus my surprise when she said a second time, and even more emphatically, "God! *Caught me! When I fell!*"

Still perplexed (and whose turn was it to be the doubting one now?), I said, "You mean, like, an angel, or something? There was someone behind you?"

"I was walking into the bathroom and I felt myself falling backwards," she said. "Straight back. And when I was halfway down, hands caught me in mid-air and lowered me gently to the floor."

"But you didn't see anyone?"

This time she pointed an arthritic index finger at me. "God caught me."

"I believe you, mom," I said. "I do. It's just a weird story. But yeah. I believe you."

"I knew you would. That's why I told you."

Then, as I watched, the fear returned and I saw that she was still dealing with the

recognition that there was no way out for her. I had seen my mother cry many times, but I had never seen her terrified.

“What’s going to happen to me?”

“Mom,” I said, not knowing what to say but feeling the need to open my mouth, even if I had no wise or comforting words. She needed me to say something, to remind her she wasn’t alone. “I don’t know how much longer you have. It doesn’t seem like you have much time left. But I can tell you this: when the end comes, the same God who caught you in the bathroom will catch you again in every way that matters.”

My own words shocked me. I seemed to be hearing them for the first time as I spoke, as if they hadn’t originated with me at all. And as her face transformed from fear to wonder, I thought, *Oh! Yes! That’s right! That’s why God caught her in the bathroom: so that she wouldn’t be afraid of death when it comes.*

She took my hands again in hers and said, “You’ve always known so much more about God than me. And I, a minister’s daughter—”

And there it was. After all these years, the thing that had caused us decades of resentment and unnecessary distance. She felt guilty because she ought to have known more, done more, been more. And why? Because of her upbringing? My encounter with Christ had come at a time of utter despair and hopelessness. Had I worn that experience as a badge of honor? Had I been arrogant? boastful? Insufferable in my brokenness and naïveté? I hadn’t *felt* that way at the time. But had the very thing which had been life to me brought regret to her? How did she not see the value—the *imago dei*—she’d exemplified as a mother, a nurse, a volunteer parent who took in foreign students when no one else wanted them? I knew more about God than she? Absurd! I didn’t even know myself.

In that sense it seemed we had the same problem. Fortunately, we also had the same solution.

“I only ever wanted to know *about* God because I encountered him,” I said. “But nobody really knows about him. Not really. All that matters is that you know Jesus. Or that *he* knows *you*. And he does. He knows you well enough to know you needed catching.”

She passed away two and a half weeks later in her own apartment, surrounded by family. I can’t say that I heard angelic choirs or that her death was pain-free. But I never again saw that expression of terror. And looking back, it has often struck me that God is a marvelous storyteller. He knows how to end a story. He even knows how to turn an ending into a beginning.

No matter how broken or misaligned the puzzle of your life, Jesus can fit it seamlessly into the flow of his. No life is truly small. No story is insignificant. No one who comes to him in humility will ever be turned away.

The story of Jesus is the one true story that gives meaning to all the others. Which is why the language of that story is not just the language of humanity; it is the language of life.

The Spirit and the bride say, “Come!” And let the one who hears say, “Come!” Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life.³⁷⁶

Appendices

Appendix A

The Tragedy Arc

Any analysis of plot based on the three types suggested by James Gunn (Boy Meets Girl, The Man Who Learned Better, and the Heroic Quest) leaves itself open to many “What about...” objections. Georges Polti suggests there are thirty-six dramatic situations because “there are in life but thirty-six emotions.”³⁷⁷ Such ideas, while interesting, are generally answerable by pointing back to the basic emotions targeted at a story’s resolution. Most plot theories are useful and true in their own way, though perhaps not equally so.

It is, however, worth addressing one plot type that is rooted in ancient literature and which may not appear to be covered by the “Three Plots” theory. The *Tragic* story arc is one of two emotion-based plots favored in Greek theater, which saw *gladness* and *sadness* as the core dramatic emotions and therefore masked its plots in the smiles of comedy or the tears of tragedy.

The Tragedy Arc is handled differently in the Bible than it is in other ancient cultures. George Steiner separates these contradictory visions with elegant simplicity. “The wars recorded in the Old Testament are bloody and grievous, but not tragic. They are just or unjust.”³⁷⁸ Furthermore,

The Judaic vision sees in disaster a specific moral fault or failure of understanding. The Greek tragic poets assert that the forces

which shape or destroy our lives lie outside the governance of reason or justice.³⁷⁹

Worse than that: there are around us daemonic energies which prey upon the soul and turn it to madness or which poison our will so that we inflict irreparable outrage upon ourselves and those we love.³⁸⁰

These observations are extremely helpful in delineating what I will refer to as *The Tragedy Arc* as the only form of tragedy that carries true meaning.

The Greek view of tragedy is essentially one of despair at the hopelessness of fate—a theme inconsistent with the language of Story but consistent with the worldview of many down through history.

There is no use asking for rational explanation or mercy. Things are as they are, unrelenting and absurd. We are punished far in excess of our guilt.³⁸¹

The Judaic view of tragedy is based on a worldview that assumes all of creation is ultimately meaningful, even when life is filled with suffering.

How then does this view of tragedy fit within a Three Plots paradigm?

A true Tragedy Arc is essentially a Man Who Learned Better story that places the audience in the seat of learning. We learn by watching someone else make a series of disastrous decisions that destroy his or her life. The outside perspective of watching events unfold—events caused by the hero's poor decision-making—encourages us to evaluate the hero's self-destructive fate and steer our own lives a different direction. Such may have been the intent of the medieval bards and scops who sang their tragedies in feudal halls before warrior kings who were often little more than despots. In its sad conclusion, *Beowulf*, for instance, raises fascinating questions about the price commoners pay when a king places his own reputation of heroism over the well-being of his people—an anti-relational act that surely belongs to the negative side of the

moral compass. Yes, Beowulf was a fearsome warrior whose deeds would live forever in the songs of the storytellers, but what of those he left behind?

On a height they kindled the hugest of all
funeral fires; fumes of woodsmoke
billowed darkly up, the blaze roared
and drowned out their weeping, wind died down
and flames wrought havoc in the hot bone-house,
burning it to the core. They were disconsolate
and wailed aloud for their lord's decease.
A Geat woman too sang out in grief;
with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abatement. Heaven swallowed the smoke.³⁸²

But there is a difference between a tragic *ending* and a tragic story arc. In a true tragedy, the protagonist suffers the consequences of some moral failure, a failure that is clear to the audience. But a tragic ending—one in which the protagonist does the right thing and yet suffers personally as a kind of sacrifice—does not elicit the same emotions and may even encourage the audience to go and do likewise. The figure below illustrates the difference between these two variations as journeys either *up* a dramatic mountain or *down* an accelerating spiral. Furthermore, these two types of tragedy, which at first glance seem similar, are actually based on different core plots. The tragic ending is usually a Heroic Quest; the tragic arc is a Man Who Learned Better.

Tragic Plots

The Tragic END

MOUNTAIN

- The Hero runs **TO** Fate.
- Moral **Ascent**
- Theme: Love of Others conquers Love of Self, producing Hatred of Self at Self's expense. (Innocence)

The Tragic ARC

SPIRAL

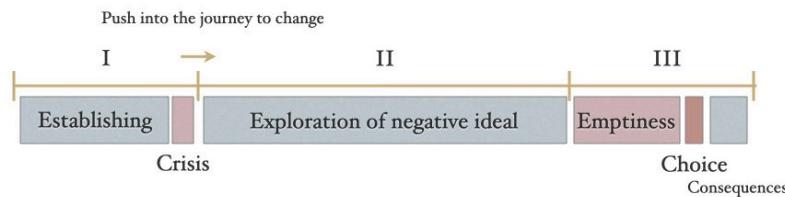
- The Hero flees **FROM** Fate.
- Moral **Descent**
- Theme: Love of Self conquers Love of Others, producing Hatred of Self at Others' expense. (Guilt)

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a familiar example of the Tragic Arc in fiction. Here the failure of the scientist is expressed as a lament of his creation (undoubtedly Shelley's embodiment of the existential despair at the perceived killing of the God of the Bible):

I entered the cabin where lay the remains of my ill-fated and admirable friend. Over him hung a form which I cannot find words to describe: ... Never did I behold a vision so horrible as his face, of such loathsome, yet appalling hideousness. I shut my eyes, involuntarily, and endeavoured to recollect what were my duties with regard to this destroyer. I called on him to stay. He paused, looking on me with wonder; and, again turning towards the lifeless form of his creator, he seemed to forget my presence, and every feature and gesture seemed instigated by the wildest rage of some uncontrollable passion. 'That is also my victim!' he exclaimed: 'in his murder my crimes are consummated; the miserable series of my being is wound to its close! Oh, Frankenstein! generous and self-devoted being! what does it avail that I now ask thee to pardon me? I, who irretrievably destroyed thee by destroying all thou lovedst. Alas! he is cold, he cannot answer me.'³⁸³

That this is a Man (or Creature) Who Learned Better story will be more apparent after a short review of the positive form of that structure, which can be seen below laid out as a three-act story, though it should be noted that not every such story need use three acts. Here the acts are representative of Aristotle's Beginning / Middle / End universal pattern:

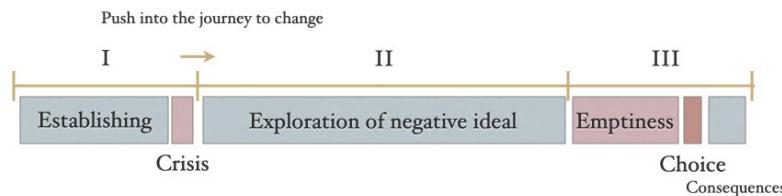
The Man Who Learned Better



1. Not always a three act structure.
2. Focus on the pressure to change.
3. The hero has **no choice** about the journey. He is forced into facing his dilemma. If he can avoid it, he is not the real hero.
4. Audience should want change before hero. Prove the positive ideal first.

Charles Dickens penned what is perhaps the most iconic form of this story in the English language. *A Christmas Carol* has been read and adapted to so many stage and film variations that its characters have become useful tropes. The reason for this is almost certainly the brilliance of the story itself, which is compact and structurally perfect in the service of its theme. Expressed as five “staves,” the plot begins by establishing Scrooge’s character and clear need for moral transformation. His need for repentance is embodied not in propositions but in the dramatic action as a refusal to celebrate Christmas. When the ghost of his old business partner, Marley, visits him in Scrooge’s miserly isolation to warn him that he is about to be visited by three spirits, Scrooge does not at first believe it. He is expressing the disinterest of the cynic. But the ghosts arrive nonetheless, and Dickens uses this structural device to show us Scrooge’s past (and thereby establishing the cause of his self-centeredness), his present (revealing the consequences of his choosing money over the love of his fellow man), and his future (predicting an inevitable destiny of eternal destruction). The story concludes with a transformation that is widely effective because Dickens provides us no exit door, no basis for moral protest. It is right that Scrooge changes, and we can’t help but agree.

The Man Who Learned Better

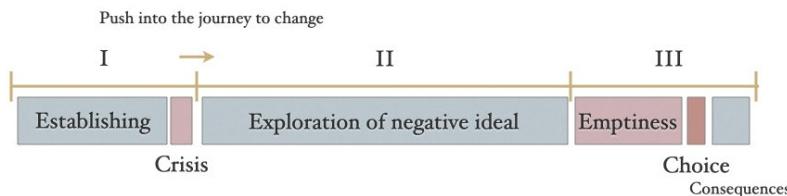


A Christmas Carol

By making us hope Scrooge will change, Dickens places us—the audience—in the position of taking a moral stand. No matter what we believe about God, goodness, or Christmas, *A Christmas Carol* makes us side with Dickens morally, at least for the length of the story.

Schindler's List, which is based on a true story, uses a virtually identical pattern to provide an extremely different cinematic experience. Here the protagonist is transformed slowly but believably through a process of relational recognition. His love of wealth is discarded for a love of his fellow man, and if that change is gradual and sometimes painful to watch, it is because we too have preferred our own advancement or personal comfort above the well-being of others.

The Man Who Learned Better



Schindler's List

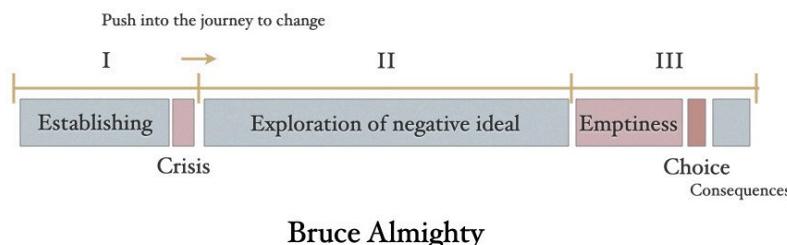
Notice the clash of ideals is identical to that of *A Christmas Carol*

1. Establishing: business Crisis: loses Jewish accountant
2. Exploration of negative: growing business on Jewish labor
3. Emptiness: money from war Choice: sacrifice \$ Cons: saves hundreds

Bruce Almighty is another excellent example of this plot type expressing the truth by

exposing a commonly-held lie, namely that if we held godlike powers we would use them for good. Bruce, the protagonist, discovers that his limited superpowers have actually made him less moral, and the only path to true love is to love unselfishly no matter the cost.

The Man Who Learned Better



1. Establishing: unempowered Crisis: Meets God
2. Exploration of negative: limited God powers
3. Emptiness: loses wife Choice: surrenders wife Cons: blessed

The pattern should now be clear. First the dramatic situation is established and the need for change communicated to the audience. Then a crisis pushes the protagonist more fully into the negative ideal that stands in opposition to the positive. The middle of the story is an exploration of that ideal and its effect on the protagonist and those within his sphere of influence. But the negative ideal cannot sustain itself, and as the story reaches its climax the protagonist is faced with a dilemma: he may achieve all that his immoral vision has desired, but it will be empty; or he can empty himself of the need to protect his flawed belief and embrace true meaning. In the end he chooses to learn better, and the relational consequences of that choice are conferred. He is restored to community and wholeness and moral transfiguration, though the personal cost involved may indeed be significant.

What separates The Man Who Learned Better from a Tragedy Arc is primarily the choice the protagonist makes at the end. In a Tragedy Arc, he makes the wrong choice, and we have

seen that choice coming a mile away. The pattern of resistance shown by the hero has been telling us all throughout the middle section of the story, in starker and starker terms, that although he understands he is wrong, he simply doesn't care. He wants what he wants.



Notice the similarities as well as the differences. But in this pattern the protagonist is effectively presented with two dilemmas: the first, encountered in the Dark Night of the Soul at the end of the second act, is the last chance for repentance and *restoration*. The second dilemma, which happens at the story's climax, is the protagonist's last chance at repentance and *salvation*.

At the end of Shakespeare's *MacBeth*, for instance, it is no longer possible for MacBeth to survive as king. The only choice left to him is that of freeing his soul from a future of eternal torment. But by that time, he has been so transformed by his increasing wickedness that he no longer desires salvation. He has embraced a meaningless nihilism.

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

- William Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5

Could the moral basis of the play be any more evident? And yet its power is not in the *exposition* of its ideals but in its *demonstration* of MacBeth's unavoidable end.

Intriguingly, the pattern of *MacBeth* is quite similar to that of Israel's first and third kings, Saul and Solomon. King David, wedged between them, is an example of the Man Who Learned Better, but for the sake of space I will deal here only with his predecessor and his son.

King Saul's tragic arc is fueled by what the narrator clearly intends to be seen as a fatal flaw: Saul cares more about what *men* think than what *God* thinks.

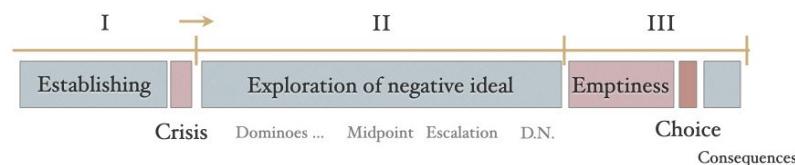
Then Saul said to Samuel, “I have sinned. I violated the LORD’s command and your instructions. I was afraid of the men and so I gave in to them.”³⁸⁴

This is the crisis that propels him into the middle section of the story, which is an exploration of Saul's negative ideal (rebellion) and a dramatization of Samuel's pronouncement that “rebellion is like the sin of divination.”³⁸⁵ Indeed, what begins with a seemingly small act of ignoring the LORD's commands ends with literal divination through the Witch of Endor.

The Tragedy Arc

King Saul

Push into the journey to change



Establishing:
Anointed by Samuel.

Crisis: Honors soldiers rather than God. "Rebellion = divination" 1Sam 15:23

Dominoes: Israel grows stronger, but Saul has no favor or prophet.

Midpoint: New king chosen by God. Saul loses the hearts of his people.

Escalation: Warned by his own family. Fits of madness.

Dark Night: Seeks to destroy "the Lord's anointed," his own son-in-law.

Emptiness: Hires foreign mercenary to murders innocent priests.

Choice: Consults witch of Endor (divination), embracing his flaw.

Consequences: Saul and Jonathan killed. David will be king.

This pattern is reproduced in the life of Solomon, though the ideals are different and the exploration of the negative is dramatized quite differently. The key moment that opens the pattern as a tragedy arc is found in a seemingly obscure reference at the beginning of the narrative. Solomon's flaw is established through a "warning" given to David at Solomon's birth.

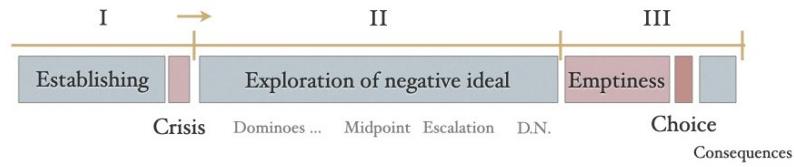
Then David comforted his wife Bathsheba, and he went to her and made love to her. She gave birth to a son, and they named him Solomon. The LORD loved him; and because the LORD loved him, he sent word through Nathan the prophet to name him Jedidiah.³⁸⁶

That this is meant to be read as a warning is evident—or ought to be—given David's lack of response. He has been given a clear instruction, but he does not follow it. Instead, the boy who should have been called "Loved by God" (Jedidiah) was instead named "Peace" (Solomon). Perhaps this is understandable in light of the lifetime of warfare David had experienced. But that of course was the point. In setting up as Solomon's defining ideal "peace at any cost," the narrator is signaling that even Solomon, David's son, will eventually surrender his status as "loved by God."

The Tragedy Arc

King Solomon

Push into the journey to change



Establishing: God's name rejected. Wisdom granted.

Crisis: Brother as enemy. Ignores Deut 17:16-17.

Peace through marriage rather than covenant.

Dominoes: Israel increases, temple built, covenant renewed, slavery established.

Midpoint: Altars to other gods, treaties through marriage, wealth and wisdom side by side...

Escalation: Warned by the prophet.

Dark Night: Turns Israel into Babylon.

Emptiness: Makes mansion larger than temple.

Choice: Peace for David's sake, but Israel will be divided.

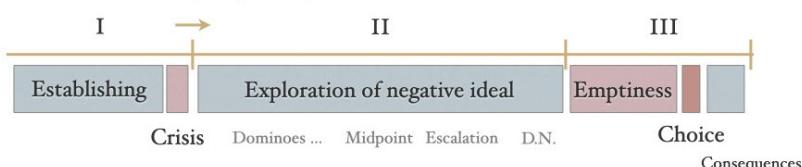
Consequences: The dissolution of the tribes.

The function of the Tragedy Arc is essentially the same as that of the Man Who Learned Better story pattern. Both make the case for returning to the "Tree of Life," the prioritizing of the relational principles found only in God and, more importantly, to a direct relationship with Him. One affirms a restoration of life; the other, the inevitability of death.

The Tragedy Arc

The Audience Who Learned Better

Push into the journey to change



Dead Stories: "Principle can follow Power."

Live Stories: "Power must follow Principle."

Appendix B

Semiotic Signs of a New Covenant

One of my goals for this book was to point out that we Evangelicals have missed a significant aspect of the New Covenant. The problem is not just that we don't know our Scriptures as a story, but that we don't know the voice of the storyteller in the particular way he promised to reveal himself: as a Master teaching an eager student via Scripture, writing his law on our hearts and minds.

Chapters seven and eight presented several arguments for this by highlighting different New Testament passages, namely Mark 4, Hebrews 8 and 10, and Luke 24. But the strongest case for rethinking our salvation-only reading of the New Covenant language may come from John's lengthy description of the last supper in chapters 14-17. The promise of the Holy Spirit to be our *teacher and counselor, leading us into all truth, and taking from what is Christ's and making it known to us*, is very compelling evidence that there is more to be mined from both the Old and the New Testaments.

In this appendix I have highlighted a few places that seem to be semiotically rich with the language, symbols, typology, and metaphors of the New Covenant promise that God will be our God, from the least of us to the greatest, and he himself will teach us his law.

No doubt I've omitted the vast majority of what lies buried in the Bible along these lines. After more than thirty years of studying the word of God I have come to understand that I know very little. What I do know is that God is a wonderful counselor and the perfect teacher for all who are ignorant but willing to learn.

Most of the rock-skipping that follows is taken chronologically from the New Testament, but two Old Testament references are worth highlighting. First, the story of the two tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments, found in Exodus 31:18-34:7, seems to be a prediction of the New Covenant given even as the Old Covenant was being written. The first two tablets are created by God and given to Moses. These are shattered when Moses sees the sin of the Israelites and he casts the tablets down. On returning to the mountain he is told to create two tablets like the former ones, and when he does, God writes his law on them. Typologically, these second two tablets may be interpreted as the heart and the mind, which must be presented to God before his law can be written upon them.

Psalm 119 too is, I believe, a prophetic foretaste of the New Covenant. It is especially revelatory when read juxtaposed against the final reference listed here from Revelation 3— noting how often the law of the LORD is compared with gold.

Exodus 34:4-5 — So Moses chiseled out two stone tablets like the first ones and went up Mount Sinai early in the morning, as the LORD had commanded him; and he carried the two stone tablets in his hands. Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD.

Psalm 119:18-20 — Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me. My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.

Psalm 119:33-36 — Teach me, LORD, the way of your decrees, that I may follow it to the end. Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain.

Psalm 119:45-48 — I will walk about in freedom, for I have sought out your precepts. I will speak of your statutes before kings and will not be put to shame, for I delight in your commands because I love them. I reach out for your commands, which I love, that I may meditate on your decrees.

Psalm 119:99-102 — I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts. I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me.

Matt 4:3-4 — The tempter came to him and said, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” (*Here there is a probably a semiotic connection to the stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments. It does not seem to be one intended by Satan, but Jesus sees the meaning even in the stones.*)

Mark 4:22-25 — For whatever is hidden is meant to be disclosed, and whatever is concealed is meant to be brought out into the open. If anyone has ears to hear, let them hear.” “Consider carefully what you hear,” he continued. “With the measure you use, it will be measured to you—and even more. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they have will be taken from them.”

Luke 8:17-18 — For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them.

Luke 10:38-42 — As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village

where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

Luke 11:52 — "Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering."

John 6:53-56 — Jesus said to them, "Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them."

John 9:36 — "Tell me so that I may believe in him."

John 14:26 — But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

John 15:26 — When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.

John 16:13-15 — But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.

John 17:17 — Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

Rom 10:17 — Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

1 Cor 2:10 — these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

1 Cor 2:12 — What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.

2 Cor 3:3 — You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Heb 10:16 — (See chapter 8)

1 John 2:27 — As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.

Rev 3:18 — I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; (*If gold here is Scripture refined by the revelatory instruction of the Holy Spirit, then “buying” it harkens back to Jesus telling his disciples to consider carefully what they hear, etc. To buy from Jesus gold refined in the fire is to sit at his feet as a disciple and await his instruction.*)

Appendix C

Why Stories

The story of Abraham taking Isaac up a mountain to sacrifice him to God—at God’s instruction, no less—has been the subject of much speculation. Some say the story paints a picture of a primitive, bloodthirsty deity whose desire for justice, whatever that represents, is expressed in an immoral slaughter of the innocent. How does the shedding of innocent blood in any way balance the scales? More importantly, what does the demand for human sacrifice say about the nature of the God of the Bible?

Such objections find a natural foothold in Genesis 22:

[1] Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him,
“Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

[2] Then God said, “Take your son , your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”

[3] Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. [4] On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. [5] He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

[6] Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and placed it on

his son Isaac, and he himself carried the fire and the knife. As the two of them went on together, [7] Isaac spoke up and said to his father Abraham, "Father?"

"Yes, my son?" Abraham replied. "The fire and wood are here," Isaac said, "but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?"

[8] Abraham answered, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." And the two of them went on together.

[9] When they reached the place God had told him about, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. He bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. [10] Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. [11] But the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, "Abraham! Abraham!"

"Here I am," he replied. [12] "Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son."

This story is difficult for Western Christians to understand for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact it is not meant to stand alone. This story is a continuation of the story of the covenant God has made with Abraham in Genesis 15, which in turn relies on a general awareness of the principles of Mesopotamian covenant traditions. These are beyond the scope of this text (not to mention my own expertise), but it is necessary to the story that we consider chapter 22 as part of a running narrative.

God has promised to bless all the nations of the world through Abraham.³⁸⁷ His descendant would eventually crush sin and reclaim the title deed of all earth. How can this happen if Abraham kills Isaac, his only son, on the altar?

God has given Abraham a command that creates a paradoxical dilemma. If Abraham complies, he will, by his own hand and at God's insistence, have destroyed any possibility of the salvation of humanity. He will have short-circuited the hope of the world in a single moment.

But if Abraham doesn't comply, he will likewise have ended the promise of salvation for

all time. Why? Because part of the covenantal tradition implicit in the ceremony is the exchange of firstborn sons. For God to eventually send his own son as a substitutionary atonement, Abraham must agree to send his. (The fire on which Isaac would have been burned would have sent the boy's spirit into the numinous realm.)

In other words, the story has given us a dilemma which no human could possibly solve. It would take the divine wisdom and mercy of YHWH to find a way to satisfy both of these mutually exclusive requirements.

Abram's (Abraham's) vision in Genesis 15:17-21 is the acting out of a covenant. It was called "cutting a covenant" because both parties would walk between the pieces of butchered animals as part of an eternal vow. The heads of the two clans or tribes would, in making this "walk into death," vow their mutual aid and friendship, thereby identify with each other. The ceremony often involved an exchange of representative gifts of wealth or food, sometimes even swapping firstborn males to be reared by the other clan.³⁸⁸

But during the Genesis 15 ceremony Abram is in a deep sleep,³⁸⁹ and the representative heads of this covenant are not human forms but symbols of God. The smoking firepot and blazing torch that pass through the pieces in Abram's vision are semiotic images of the LORD. Thus God is making a covenant with God. One of these symbols is acting as a stand-in for Abram, as if to say, *You will not be capable of fulfilling your end of the covenant. I will therefore do it for you.*

Yet still there are terms, for the slaughtered animals are not the product of a dream. Before he fell asleep, Abram slaughtered a heifer, a goat, and a ram in preparation for this covenant ceremony.³⁹⁰

The sacrifice and the meeting with God are physical acts in the material world; they are

not something that can be assigned to the realm of the spirit and left undone in the natural one.

Robert Alter's translation of Gen 15:10 and his associated commentary read:

And he took all of these and clove them through the middle, and each set his part opposite the other, but the birds he did not cleave.

10. *Each set his part.* Existing translations fudge the vivid anthropomorphism of the Hebrew here: 'ish, literally, "man," means "each" but is a word applied to animate beings, not to things, so it must refer to the two parties to the covenant facing each other, not to the animal parts.³⁹¹

It's important to recognize that Abram and God take their places as representative heads *before* the vision of Abram's deep sleep. The covenant is not the product of a vision. Rather, the vision is one part of the covenant ceremony and is best understood as a result of God taking Abram's place. Abram needed to be aware of what was happening but incapable of participating in the "walk into death."

All of this has been explained elsewhere,³⁹² and it is not chiefly what I am concerned with here. My point is that God's commanding Abraham to sacrifice Isaac must be understood in context. Without the sacrifice of the boy, God's covenant promises could not be delivered because there would be no exchange of firstborn; Jesus would not come here if Isaac did not go there. That at any rate is the idea from the standpoint of a two-party covenant. But if Isaac *were* sacrificed, then God's promise of the messiah coming through Abraham's descendant—"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"—that³⁹³ promise would be nullified, for there would be no more line of Abraham.

This is the dilemma, the situational backdrop against which Abraham's obedience is set. And it forms the basis for an answer to the question, Why would God tell Abraham to sacrifice Isaac?

This answer will not be satisfying to many. For one thing, the intricacies of covenant

rituals seem wholly irrelevant to the postmodern world. I can hear someone objecting, “But it’s barbaric! Would you kill your son if God told you to?”

Indeed, this question has been asked of many Christians, sometimes in sincerity and sometimes as a *gotcha!* question meant to trap the faithful in a religious dilemma.

My answer to that question is the subject of this appendix, for it points to the nature of Story as an instructive device. If God told me to sacrifice my son, would I do it?

Absolutely not! ... and here’s why: I know from Scripture that God would not tell me to sacrifice my son! That is ultimately what the language of the story of Genesis 22 is communicating.

No person in human history has ever had a better reason to commit human sacrifice, for Abraham was the pivotal figure whose covenant with God would set in motion the salvation of humanity and the reclaiming of dominion authority by the eventual messiah.

Yet even Abraham, when taken to the very brink of that moment, is restrained by God and told, “Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him.”

God could (and did) expressly forbid the sacrifice of children in the Old Testament (Lev 18:21, 20:2-5, Deut 12:31, 18:10, Jer 7:31, etc.), yet Israel still fell into the worship of Molech through human sacrifice. But where laws might be forgettable, a story is not so easily discarded. The atheists who use the story of Abraham and Isaac to challenge God’s moral nature do not cite Leviticus or Deuteronomy or Ezekiel. They cite Genesis 22. And the reason for this is obvious: commands are not as effective as stories.

When Israel rebelled against Yahweh and turned to foreign gods, it was to those foreign gods they sacrificed their children. They did not offer their children to Yahweh.

In an ancient (or even postmodern) world thick with the barbarism of demon worship and

child sacrifice, a world in which God's people were (or are) urged to do likewise, Israel would need something powerful enough to repeatedly call her back to God's ways, to help her understand the relational, compassionate, and loving God of creation, the God of life.

They would need the power of metaphors and imagery—a power capable of lingering in the imagination of a culture for thousands of years.

They would need a story.

Acknowledgments

On his deathbed, Thomas Aquinas reportedly called all that he had written “a heap of straw.” His heaps were at least written by Thomas Aquinas. If anything recommends mine it is that so many people besides me have helped shape them.

I am deeply grateful to my doctoral committee: Dr. Tony Blair, Tineke Hegeman Bryson, and Dr. Timothy R. Valentino. Thank you for your willingness to read this manuscript and offer your insight into making it better.

Dr. Leonard Sweet gave me invaluable feedback and encouragement on many of these chapters, which were in some cases submitted as papers for the Cohort 4 Semiotics Track at Evangelical Theological Seminary and, later, at Kairos University. Thank you for your commitment to making the semiotics of Scripture accessible.

My fellow griffins, Jim Allen and Justin Scoggins, provided validation and comic relief, as well as excellent pushback on some of my zanier suggestions.

Mike and Pam Jensen and everyone at the house church where I worship were routinely supportive. Thank you for praying for this project and tolerating my numerous rants about obscure theological discussions.

And finally, to Carrol Schwabauer for putting up with my recurring bouts of self-doubt and for deepening many of my *What-if?* propositions with scriptural insights of your own. Thank you for sharing the journey of life with me.

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Notes

Introduction: My Summer on Mars

¹ A. Tennyson, “In Memorium,” (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1850), Canto LVI.

² While a lengthy discussion of the nature of meaning is beyond the scope of this book, it may be useful to begin with Richard E. Morehouse’s definition of meaning as “a relationship between two sorts of things: signs and the kinds of things they intend, express, or signify.” - Richard E Morehouse, *Beginning Interpretive Inquiry*, (Routledge, 2012), 32.

For a brief but thoughtful analysis of the connection between meaning and signs, see Daniel Chandler’s *Semiotics: The Basics*, particularly pages 2-7. That book is referenced in the Bibliography.

1. The Great Pyramid

³ See James Bryan Smith’s excellent book on the subject, *The Magnificent Story*, referenced in the bibliography.

⁴ Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 79, no. 5 (2000): 701.

⁵ Genesis 3:1 NIV

⁶ Matthew 13:52 NIV

⁷ Leonard Sweet, *The Bad Habits of Jesus: Showing Us the Way to Live Right in a World Gone Wrong* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016), 77.

⁸ See Appendix A for a more thorough comparison of the two stories.

⁹ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal* (New York: Mariner Books, 2013), 55.

¹⁰ Mark Lehner & Zahi Hawass, *Giza and the Pyramids: The Definitive History*. (The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 91.

¹¹ Ibid, 94.

¹² Mark Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids: Solving the Ancient Mysteries* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), 39.

¹³ “Archaeology at Giza,” Harvard University, accessed April 8, 2022,
<http://giza.fas.harvard.edu/archaeology/>

¹⁴ Mark Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids: Solving the Ancient Mysteries* (London: Thames & Hudson,

1997), 34.

¹⁵ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal* (New York: Mariner Books, 2013), 58.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 52.

¹⁷ Perhaps they are, but not in the way we expect.

¹⁸ The moral compass will be more fully explored in chapter five.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds* (New York: HarperOne, 2017), 60.

²⁰ Diana Wynne Jones, *Reflections: On the Magic of Writing* (New York: Greenwillow Books, 2012), 78.

²¹ Maria Tatar, *The Annotated Classic Fairy Tales*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002), 56.

²² Leonard Sweet and Michael Adam Beck, *Contextual Intelligence: Unlocking the Ancient Secret to Mission on the Front Lines*. (Oviedo: HigherLife Development Services, Inc., 2020), 47-48.

²³ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*. (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 4.

²⁴ James Bryan Smith, *The Magnificent Story: Uncovering a Gospel of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2017), 4.

²⁵ Leonard Sweet, *The Bad Habits of Jesus: Showing Us the Way to Live Right in a World Gone Wrong* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016), 77.

2. Kill the Wabbit!

²⁶ Plato. *Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Symposium, Republic*. Translated by B. Jowett, edited by L. Loomis. Roslyn, (New York: Walter J. Black, 1942), 288.

²⁷ “Actor Billy Crystal pays \$239,000 for Mickey Mantel glove,” *CNN.com*. Sep 28, 1999.

²⁸ Kenneth Bailey. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic), 2008, 279.

²⁹ Karen Swallow Prior. *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Books*. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018), 15.

³⁰ Allen E. Lewis. *Between Cross & Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 21.

³¹ Philip and Carol Zaleski. *Prayer: A History*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005), 246.

³² John Gardner. *On Moral Fiction*. (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1978), 15.

3. The Price Paid

³³ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 9.

³⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 97.

³⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds* (New York: HarperOne, 2017), 60.

³⁶ Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public

Narratives," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, the American Psychological Association. Inc. 2000, Vol. 79, No. 5, 707.

³⁷ Ibid, 718.

³⁸ Todd W. Hall, *Relational Spirituality: A Psychological-Theological Paradigm for Transformation* (Christian Association for Psychological Studies Books), (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 100.

³⁹ Diana Wynne Jones, *Reflections: On the Magic of Writing* (New York: Greenwillow Books, 2012), 77-78.

⁴⁰ "The rapid, non-conscious networks of emotion shape the way we think about the world before we become aware of our perceptions and thoughts. Emotions, then, provide a powerful source of information. Because they are processed automatically and outside of our direct control, our emotional responses provide the clearest window into the deepest level of our soul—the meanings we connect to relationships and events in our lives. We cannot manipulate the emotional meaning we assign to events, so they reveal what we really believe at a gut level about ourselves and others in our relational world." - Todd W. Hall, *Relational Spirituality: A Psychological-Theological Paradigm for Transformation* (Christian Association for Psychological Studies Books), (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 104.

⁴¹ Stanley D. Williams, *The Moral Premise: Harnessing Virtue and Vice for Box Office Success*, (Studio City: Michael Wiese Productions, 2006), 50.

⁴² Thomas Babington McAulay, 'Horatius at the Bridge,' (London: Pearson Longman, 1842), LXV-LXVI .

⁴³ Ibid, XXVII.

⁴⁴ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, (New York: ReganBooks, 1997), 101.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 211.

⁴⁶ John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 62.

⁴⁷ Robert McKee, *Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting*, (New York: ReganBooks, 1997), 309.

⁴⁸ Todd W. Hall, *Relational Spirituality: A Psychological-Theological Paradigm for Transformation* (Christian Association for Psychological Studies Books), (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 241.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 242.

⁵⁰ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), 67.

⁵¹ *Dogfights*, Season 1, episode 4, "The Deadly Skies of Guadalcanal," directed by Robert Kirk, aired Nov 24, 2006, on The History Channel. (2nd Lieutenant Jefferson J. DeBlanc quoted at 32:10.)

4. The Road to Relevance

⁵² *Macbeth* Act 1, Scene 3, lines 123-125

⁵³ Nevertheless, Deconstruction has been used as a way to weaponize language in the pursuit of political goals. "Deconstruction allows you to dismiss whole literary and legal traditions as built upon sexist or racist or otherwise exploitative assumptions. It provides a justification for setting them aside." - Stephen R. C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Expanded

Edition), (Ockham's Razor, 2013), Loc 4094. Kindle edition.

⁵⁴ John Green, *The Fault in Our Stars*, (Penguin Young Readers Group, 2012), 316.

⁵⁵ Ecclesiastes 8:17 NIV

⁵⁶ G. K. Chesterton. *Orthodoxy*. (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 1994, 2001), 18.

⁵⁷ "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." - John 3:8 NIV

⁵⁸ Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

⁵⁹ While it is true that semioticians have disagreed over each of these four elements in the process of meaning-making, this is not the place to explore them. For a science dedicated to meaning, semiotics is often remarkably bad at communicating clearly.

⁶⁰ "... the whole creation is uttered and 'meant' by God, and therefore has no meaning in itself." - Rowan Williams, *On Augustine*, (Bloomsbury, 2016), 45, quoted in Luke Bell, *The Mystery of Identity*, (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2022), 102.

⁶¹ Ecclesiastes 3:10-11 NIV

⁶² "To be an American is to be an individualist." - David A. Livermore, *Cultural Intelligence: Improving Your CQ to Engage Our Multicultural World*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 125.

⁶³ Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers, *Power of Myth*, (Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, 1991).

⁶⁴ Will Storr, *The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human and How to Tell Them Better*, (Abrams Press, 2020), 1.

⁶⁵ Gurliand, Ilia (11 July 1904). "Reminiscences of A.P. Chekhov". *Teatr i Iskusstvo* (28): 521.

⁶⁶ Barfield, Owen. *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2nd edition, 1988. p. 94-95.

⁶⁷ Jeremy Adams, *Hollowed Out: A Warning about America's Next Generation*, (Regnery Publishing, 2021), 4.

⁶⁸ Elon Musk, "Elon Musk: Neuralink, AI, Autopilot, and the Pale Blue Dot," YouTube, Lex Fridman Podcast #49, November 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smK9dgdTl40&t=1088s>

⁶⁹ Luke Bell, *The Mystery of Identity*, (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2022), 102-103.

⁷⁰ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," *Lyrical Ballads*. (London: 1834).

⁷¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, (New York: Convergent Books, 1980), 95.

5. The Best Theme Park Ever

⁷² Scott McClouds' *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is well worth reading for anyone interested in narrative patterns. It also provides a wealth of insight into the techniques used by comic artists.

⁷³ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, (New York: Convergent Books, 1980), 25.

⁷⁴ John Gardner, *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 31.

⁷⁵ Leland Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative*, (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), 14.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 26.

⁷⁷ Karen Swallow Prior, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life Through Great Books*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018), 29.

⁷⁸ A. Tennyson, "In Memorium," (London: Edward Moxon, Dover Street, 1850), Canto LVI

⁷⁹ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, (New York: Convergent Books, 1980), 7.

⁸⁰ *As You Like it*, Act 2, Scene 7.

⁸¹ Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 240.

⁸² Nonna Verna Harrison, *God's Many-Splendored Image: Theological Anthropology for Christian Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 69.

⁸³ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 76.

⁸⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 189.

6. God in the Hands of Angry Sinners

⁸⁵ Rebecca Kuhn, "Preaching to the Choir: The Culture War and the Box Office Success of Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ," Dissertation. Florida Atlantic University, 2009, 119.

⁸⁶ Zev Garber, *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006), 157.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 156

⁸⁸ Frank Pittman, "A Passion for Torture: Mel Gibson's Film Epitomizes a Medieval Conception of Sin," *Psychotherapy Networker*, May (2004).

⁸⁹ Douglas A.Sweeney, *The American Evangelical Story: A History of the Movement* (Baker Publishing Group, 2005). Kindle edition, 161.

⁹⁰ Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (Yale University Press, 1991), Kindle edition, 216-217.

⁹¹ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2022), Kindle edition, 5-7.

⁹² Ibid. 163

⁹³ Garth M. Rosell, *The Surprising Work of God: Harold John Ockenga, Billy Graham, and the Rebirth of Evangelicalism* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), Kindle edition, 13.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 115

⁹⁵ Hatch, Nathan O.. *The Democratization of American Christianity*. Yale University Press, 1991, 138. Kindle edition.

⁹⁶ Sachsman, David B. and Rushing, Kittrell and Morris, Roy. *Memory and Myth: The Civil War in Fiction and Film from Uncle Tom's Cabin to Cold Mountain*. Purdue University Press, 2007, 8. *ISBN 978-1557534392*.

⁹⁷ Harold S. Wilson, *McClure's Magazine and the Muckrakers*, (Princeton University Press, 1970), 3.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 26

⁹⁹ Ibid, 3

¹⁰⁰ Several years ago I purchased from a small bookshop a collection of original, archivally-bound *McClure's Magazines* released in 1885-1901.

¹⁰¹ Wilson, Harold S.. *McClure's Magazine and the Muckrakers*. Princeton University Press, 1970. P. 284

¹⁰² Jacob Riis, *The Making of an American*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1901. 430-431.

¹⁰³ Amy Lifson, "Ben-Hur: The Book That Shook the World," (*Humanities*. Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Humanities, 2009), 30.

¹⁰⁴ While it is true that the Lamplighter catalogue has the advantage of working with public domain titles, my point is that even a list of more successful contemporary fiction—conceived by the American church but for secular consumption—would be difficult to imagine. Have we seen more than a few dozen such titles?

¹⁰⁵ Todd Smith, *A Creative Church: The Arts and a Century of Renewal*, Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2015, 12.

¹⁰⁶ Garber, Zev. *Mel Gibson's Passion: The Film, the Controversy, and Its Implications*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2006, 36.

¹⁰⁷ Richard Alleva, "Torturous: Mel Gibson's 'The Passion of the Christ,'" *Commonweal*, March 12, 2004, 18+. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed July 22, 2022).

¹⁰⁸ *Mel Gibson's passion: An Interview with Mel Gibson by Diane Sawyer* [Television broadcast]. (2004). Orland Park, Illinois. Quoted in Tyler, Lisa. "He Was Pretty Good in There Today" : Reviving the Macho Christ in Ernest Hemingway's 'Today Is Friday' and Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*. *Analecta Gorgiana*. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013. Also viewed in full via youtube.com/watch?v=7Ecnef530IE

¹⁰⁹ Matt 10:16 NIV

¹¹⁰ Taken from my class discussion notes on multiple occasions between 2021 and 2023.

¹¹¹ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 128.

¹¹² Gerard Manley Hopkins, quoted in Michael D. Hurley and Michael O'Neill, "The Elements of Poetic Form (Chapter 1) - Poetic Form," Cambridge Core, accessed May 13, 2023, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/poetic-form/elements-of-poetic-form/FB48435F15BD065963D189BF82669B6D>.

¹¹³ Carl Ellis and Karen Ellis, "Forward," *A Supreme Love: The Music of Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel*, (InterVarsity Press, 2022), ix.

¹¹⁴ Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker: The Expression of Faith through Creativity and Art*, (Open Road Media, 2015), 37.

¹¹⁵ "Why is ring composition practiced all over the world? What is it for? So many people! So many epochs! They could not have all learned it from one another. Its robustness over thousands of years

supports the theory that something in the brain preserves it, and yet we know that it can fade out so completely that new readers miss it altogether." - Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition (The Terry Lectures Series)*, (Yale University Press, 2007), 12.

7. The Storyteller's Parable

¹¹⁶ "The disciples came to him..." - Matthew 13:10

¹¹⁷ Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 25.

¹¹⁸ Hebrews 8:10-11 NIV

¹¹⁹ Mark 4:12 NIV

¹²⁰ Isaiah 6:3 NIV

¹²¹ John 12:41 NIV

¹²² Mark 4:14-15 NIV

¹²³ This reading is underlined dramatically by the chiastic structure of the passage, which creates a parallel between the lampstand of the parable and Christ's rationale for speaking in parables. I am grateful to Dr. Douglas H. Buckwalter, New Testament scholar at Evangelical Theological Seminary, for his notes on Mark chapter 4, "Jesus' speaking to the crowds in parables (Mark 4:1-34)."

¹²⁴ Leonard Sweet, *The Bad Habits of Jesus: Showing Us the Way to Live Right in a World Gone Wrong* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2016), 77.

¹²⁵ Patrick Schreiner. "The Sermon on the Mount and Jesus as the New Moses." BibleProject, 2019. <https://bibleproject.com/blog/sermon-mount-jesus-new-moses/>

¹²⁶ Leonard Sweet and Michael Adam Beck, *Contextual Intelligence: Unlocking the Ancient Secret to Mission on the Front Lines*. (Oviedo: HigherLife Development Services, Inc., 2020), 121.

¹²⁷ Elon Musk, "Elon Musk: Neuralink, AI, Autopilot, and the Pale Blue Dot," YouTube, Lex Fridman Podcast #49, November 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=smK9dgdTl40&t=1088s>

¹²⁸ Romans 8:6 NIV

¹²⁹ Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion*. (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2008), 112.

¹³⁰ Brian Anse Patrick, *The Ten Commandments of Propaganda*. (London: Arktos, 2013), 44.

¹³¹ Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 82.

¹³² Matthew 6:24 NIV

¹³³ Mark 4:22 NIV

¹³⁴ Mark 4:24 NIV

¹³⁵ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 281.

¹³⁶ "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." - Luke 16:31 NIV

¹³⁷ John 3:3 NIV

8. The Voice of the Storyteller

¹³⁸ Acts 17:24-27 NIV

¹³⁹ Matthew 10:7 NIV

¹⁴⁰ Bailey, Kenneth. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. (IVP Academic, 2008), 280.

¹⁴¹ John 21:25 NIV

¹⁴² Luke Bell, *The Mystery of Identity*, (Brooklyn: Angelico Press, 2022), 102.

¹⁴³ Bailey, Kenneth. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. (IVP Academic, 2008), 283.

¹⁴⁴ John 6:8-12 NIV

¹⁴⁵ John 6:26-27 NIV

¹⁴⁶ John 6:33 NIV

¹⁴⁷ John 10:27 NIV

¹⁴⁸ Matt 16:9,11 NIV

¹⁴⁹ Mark 4:10,34 NIV

¹⁵⁰ Romans 10:17

¹⁵¹ Mark 4:24 NIV

¹⁵² John 9:36 NIV

¹⁵³ Wilda Gaffney, *Womanist Midrash* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 3-4.

¹⁵⁴ Malcolm Guite, *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God*, (Baltimore: Square Halo Books, 2021), 11.

¹⁵⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*. (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 2.

¹⁵⁶ Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Dover Thrift Editions: Classic Novels). Dover Publications, 2012, 77. Kindle edition.

¹⁵⁷ Eugene Peterson, *Leap Over a Wall: Earthy Spirituality for Everyday Christians*. (New York: HarperOne, 1998), 3.

¹⁵⁸ “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” - John 10:27 NIV

¹⁵⁹ John 3:3 NIV

¹⁶⁰ John 9:?? NIV

¹⁶¹ Hebrews 8:10-12 NIV

¹⁶² Jeremiah 31:31-34 NIV

¹⁶³ That the New Covenant is extended even to Gentiles seems to be the focus of much of the New Testament. Paul, for instance, writes, “remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in

the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ." (Ephesians 2:12-13 NIV)

¹⁶⁴ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, (New York: Convergent Books, 1980), 125.

¹⁶⁵ Hebrews 10:14-17 NIV

¹⁶⁶ Matthew 4:6 NIV

¹⁶⁷ John 5:39-40 NIV

¹⁶⁸ John 16:13 NIV

¹⁶⁹ John 16:14 NIV

¹⁷⁰ Matthew 16:16-18 NIV

¹⁷¹ Daniel 2:45 NIV

¹⁷² Daniel 2:44 NIV

¹⁷³ Daniel 2:45 NIV

¹⁷⁴ Mark 4:24 NIV

¹⁷⁵ Luke 24:27, 30-32 NIV

9. An Ideal World

¹⁷⁶ "This form is readily appreciated and understood by scholars when it includes only a few sentences. The large compositions constructed in this way, however, have had a bad reception in the West. The ring form has had a history of misunderstanding and disregard." - Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition (The Terry Lectures Series)*. (Yale University Press, 2007), 2.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 16.

¹⁷⁸ Gen 1:26 NIV

¹⁷⁹ Gen 2:9 NIV

¹⁸⁰ Gen 3:22 NIV

¹⁸¹ Gen 2:16-17 NIV

¹⁸² Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 11-12.

¹⁸³ Gen 3:5 NIV

¹⁸⁴ 1 Kings 11:33 NIV (But see also: Exodus 15:26; Deuteronomy 12:25, 12:28; 13:18, 21:9 1 Kings 11:38, 14:8, 15:5, 15:11, 22:43; 2 Kings 10:30, 12:2, 14:3, 15:3, 16:2, 18:3, 22:2; 2 Chronicles 20:32, 24:2, 25:2, 26:4, 27:2, 28:1, 29:2, 34:2.)

¹⁸⁵ Chapter 19, for instance, tells a gruesome story of rape, murder, and dismemberment resulting from people who are apparently doing what is right in their own eyes.

¹⁸⁶ Ephesians 6:12 NIV

¹⁸⁷ Matt 13:19 NIV

¹⁸⁸ John 12:31 NIV

¹⁸⁹ Mark 3:23, 3:26 NIV

¹⁹⁰ Gen 3:24 NIV

¹⁹¹ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, (New York: Convergent Books, 1980), 72.

¹⁹² Proverbs 9:6 NIV

¹⁹³ Proverbs 9:17-18 NIV

¹⁹⁴ “The other prime test of a well-turned ring is the loading of meaning on the center and the connections made between the center and the beginning; in other words, the center of a polished ring integrates the whole.” - Mary Douglas, *Thinking in Circles: An Essay on Ring Composition (The Terry Lectures Series)*. (Yale University Press, 2007), 31.

¹⁹⁵ Proverbs 9:10 - Robert Alter, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 234.

¹⁹⁶ Steven Pinker, *Rationality: What It Is, Why It Seems Scarce, Why It Matters*, (Penguin Publishing Group, 2021), 67.

¹⁹⁷ “The rapid, nonconscious networks of emotion shape the way we think about the world before we become aware of our perceptions and thoughts. Emotions, then, provide a powerful source of information. Because they are processed automatically and outside of our direct control, our emotional responses provide the clearest window into the deepest level of our soul—the meanings we connect to relationships and events in our lives. We cannot manipulate the emotional meaning we assign to events, so they reveal what we really believe at a gut level about ourselves and others in our relational world.” - Todd W. Hall, *Relational Spirituality: A Psychological-Theological Paradigm for Transformation (Christian Association for Psychological Studies Books)*, (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 104.

¹⁹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, (London: HarperCollins Children’s Books, 2010) 165.

¹⁹⁹ Owen Barfield, *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning (Wesleyan Paperback)*, (Owen Barfield, 2023), 171.

10. Behold a Wonderful Hippo!

²⁰⁰ Alter, Robert, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), xv.

²⁰¹ Stephen J. Vicchio explains: “The Hebrew expression *bene ha Elohim* literally means ‘the sons of God.’ The word *ben* is used in the Hebrew Bible not only to describe the family of a person, but also his intimate relations. Various nicknames use the word *ben*, like ‘son of strength,’ ‘son of wickedness.’ In another context, all human beings are sons of God, or children of God, as Deut 14: 50 and Exod 4: 22 imply.” - Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 50.

²⁰² For a deep explanation of the Divine Council, see Michael Heiser’s *The Unseen Realm*: “God has an unseen family--in fact, it’s his original family.” - Heiser, Michael S., *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Lexham Press, 2015), Kindle edition, 25

²⁰³ See Matthew 16:19, in which Jesus says, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever

you bind on earth will have been loosed in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven." (NIV) Young's Literal Translation's renders this: "... whatever thou mayest bind upon earth shall be having been bound in the heavens, and whatever thou mayest loose upon the earth shall be having been loosed in the heavens." (YLT)

²⁰⁴ Dorsey, David A., *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis — Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 19.

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 31.

²⁰⁶ Ibid, 170.

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 16.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 16.

²⁰⁹ Sweet, Leonard, *Giving Blood: A Fresh Paradigm for Preaching* (Zondervan, 2014), Kindle edition, 28.

²¹⁰ Job 1:6 NIV

²¹¹ Stephen J. Vicchio tells us, "Gregory the Great and Thomas Aquinas both continued the Christian view that Satan and the devil were one and the same figures....Henry Cowles, in his 1877 commentary, tells us: The Satan's character and work as put here are in full accord with the numerous allusions made to him throughout Scripture. He is the same old serpent, the Devil." - Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 52.

²¹² Vicchio argues that, "...we are supposed to see *ha Satan* as one of the sons of God, and a notable member of that class." However, this point in no way mitigates the nature of his status in the story as a villain. It may actually highlight it. [Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 51.]

²¹³ Job 1:7 NIV

²¹⁴ Job 1:7 NIV

²¹⁵ See Deuteronomy 32:8.

²¹⁶ Halbertal writes: "Job feels twice betrayed, and with good reason. Once by God, who has inflicted his suffering, and once by his friends, who blame him for his own suffering." - Halbertal, Moshe, "Job, the Mourner." In *The Book of Job: Aesthetics, Ethics, Hermeneutics*, edited by Leora Batnitzky and Ilana Pardes, 1st ed., 37–46. (De Gruyter, 2015), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvbkk23h.6>. p. 38.

²¹⁷ Nayeri, Daniel, *Everything Sad Is Untrue: (a true story)*, (Levine Querido, 2020), Kindle edition, 74

²¹⁸ This idea may be what *The Book of Enoch* is getting at when God tells Enoch to deliver a message to the 'Watcher' spirits on earth: "You were in heaven, but all the mysteries of heaven had not been revealed to you, and you knew worthless ones, and these in the hardness of your hearts you have made known to the women, and through these mysteries women and men work much evil on earth." (16:3)

The 'mysteries' Paul reveals in the New Testament are firmly aligned with principle; for instance, "this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." (Col 1:27)

²¹⁹ "The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, 'I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.'" Luke 4:5-6 NIV

²²⁰ Even if we imagine the authority flowing from God to Adam /Eve to Satan, the source is still God.

²²¹ In story terms, Satan's internal Ideal is Pride/Arrogance, which is mirrored in an external reality or trait, Power. We will see this expanded later in *Job* as Satan's metaphorical image, Leviathan, is

described in detail using these two character properties.

²²² Some assume that God granted permission for Satan to kill Job's children, but the story does not suggest this. We are told that Job is worried about the spiritual condition of his children, who are adults living outside his household. It is more likely that we are meant to dread what is coming—that Satan has waited for an opportune time to deliver the really crushing blow of death to Job's children. Such a reading makes sense of the opening prologue and Job's reaction to the horrifying news: what he dreaded most was not the loss of his riches but the loss of his children while they were partying.

²²³ Job 2:5

²²⁴ Job 2:6 may be significant in the story of the crucifixion and reversal of divine authority on earth.

²²⁵ Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 58.

²²⁶ Was the earth cursed in the garden by God, or by the absence of what Adam was intended to do and be? Might the text imply that the earth was cursed *because of* Adam, ("cursed [is] the ground for thy sake")? In other words, if the earth was created to be cultivated and nurtured by humans, was our corruption the proximate cause of this particular curse?

²²⁷ Muggeridge, Malcolm, *The End of Christendom*, (Grand Rapids: W., B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 39.

²²⁸ Ibid, 40.

²²⁹ Indeed, there is no shortage of scholarly opinion that ultimately sees the God of Job as a God of ultimate power devoid of principle. For instance: "He Who speaks to man in the Book of Job is neither a just nor an unjust god but God." [Tsevat, Matitiahu, "The Meaning of the Book of Job," (*Hebrew Union College Annual* 37, 1966): 73–106. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23503115>, 105.]

²³⁰ Scholars often refer to these two chapters as a prologue. I avoid that term here because it implies the background is not a necessary part of the story of *Job*.

²³¹ See, for instance, Job 4:8-9, 8:4, 8:13-19, 11:10-12, 18:5-21, and 20:4-29.

²³² Job 6:21 NIV

²³³ Notice that Job does not say that his life or his property or his happiness is at stake, but his integrity. Job's position here is a reflection of God's.

²³⁴ Job 6:29 NIV

²³⁵ Dorsey, David A., *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis — Malachi* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 168.

²³⁶ "This is how art can be transformational and contribute to an expanded awareness of life and its meaning or truth. Art invites to participation rather than explanation, 'straining for truth and value without defining them'." - Heaney, Maeve Louise, *Suspended God: Music and a Theology of Doubt* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), Kindle edition, 218.

²³⁷ In other words, not everyone sees the same patterns in Job, or indeed in any book of the Bible. But modern scholarship is beginning to recognize the extent to which ancient writers used such structures. Scripture is written in parallelism, from Genesis to Revelation, even if we don't recognize or appreciate it.

²³⁸ Job 28:28 NIV

²³⁹ "Jesus' whole life and subsequent death was a challenge to false or incomplete images of God. So Job is commended for not accepting an image of God that is not worthy of Him." - Heaney, Maeve Louise, *Suspended God: Music and a Theology of Doubt* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), Kindle edition, 539.

²⁴⁰ Job 32:1 NIV

²⁴¹ Job 32:2 NIV

²⁴² Though many have questioned whether the Elihu chapters are original to the story, “a growing number of scholars defend the Elihu speeches as part of the original book.” [Steinmann, Andrew E., “The Structure and Message of the Book of Job,” (*Vetus Testamentum* 46, no. 1, 1996): 85–100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1585391>. p. 88.]

²⁴³ Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 57.

²⁴⁴ How ironic that he claims this for himself yet denies it for Job!

²⁴⁵ Job 34:4 NIV

²⁴⁶ This interpretation of Elihu is not universal in church history, but then, no interpretation of Elihu is. The pseudoeigraphal *Testament of Job* is perhaps the best known work to put Elihu completely in the camp of the Evil One.

²⁴⁷ Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 220.

²⁴⁸ Alter, Robert, *The Wisdom Books: Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010) 6.

²⁴⁹ Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 215.

²⁵⁰ Job 1:6

²⁵¹ Job 38:2 NIV

²⁵² Chesterton, G.K., *Introduction to the Book of Job* (London: Cecil Palmer & Hayward, 1916) xx.

²⁵³ Boyd, Greg, “The Point of the Book of Job,” (ReKnew.org, October 16, 2018), <https://reknew.org/2018/10/the-point-of-the-book-of-job/>

²⁵⁴ Ross, Hugh, *Hidden Treasures in the Book of Job: How the Oldest Book in the Bible Answers Today’s Scientific Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 178-183.

²⁵⁵ “one interesting feature of the descriptions of both Behemoth and Leviathan is that at both 40: 24, and at 41: 1, the text asks two rhetorical questions about whether humans can “pierce his nose with a hook” and “draw out Leviathan with a hook?” - Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 279.

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 275.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 277.

²⁵⁸ “In 2011, Ron Garan spent six months living on the International Space Station. Amid his grueling schedule of scientific experiments and technical repairs, he was sometimes able to gaze at the “fragile oasis” of the earth below: One of the really interesting things about a long-duration space flight is that you get to watch the earth transform over the weeks and the months that you’re up there. You get to watch the ice break up, the seasons change. And from that perspective over time, you really get the sense that we have this living, breathing organism hanging in the blackness of space just riding through the universe.” - Krznic, Roman, *The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking* (The Experiment, 2020), Kindle edition, 158.

²⁵⁹ “Although the word appears in the plural, the context indicates that Behemoth is the name of a great beast, making it a singular noun.” - Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and*

a Commentary (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 275.

²⁶⁰ Interestingly, verses 19-38 move from earth to the heavens in a subtle reminder of the parallelism of Genesis 1:2 and 1:14. First the domain of earth as a container for dry land and seas, then the domain of the heavens as the place of darkness and light, wind and rain.

Verses 38:39 - 39:25 then move to earth's living creatures, and 39:26-30 on the sky-dwelling eagle, inversely mirroring Genesis 1.

²⁶¹ The words for “loins” and “belly” in this verse are “waist” and “abdomen,” masculine and feminine nouns respectively, with the latter carrying implications of the womb. Earth is teeming with life.

²⁶² Rev 12:15-16

²⁶³ Rev 20:10-15 NIV

²⁶⁴ Rev 21:1 reads, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.”

²⁶⁵ “The ‘like the eyelids of the dawn’ of v. 18b is, perhaps, a reference to the reddish hue of the eyes of the crocodile. Newsom says it refers to ‘dawn’s light that has a reddish hue.’ She refers to the German expression, morgenrot, that literally means, ‘the red of morning.’” - Vicchio, Stephen J., *The Book of Job: A History of Interpretation and a Commentary* (Wipf & Stock, 2020), 284.

²⁶⁶ “A pride—strong ones of shields, Shut up—a close seal. One unto another they draw nigh, And air doth not enter between them.” Job 41:15-16 YLT

²⁶⁷ Olympiodorus, sixth-century deacon of Alexandria, apparently saw this trait as a significant indicator of the contrast between godly principle and demonic power: “The souls that advance with a high neck (as is confirmed by Isaiah) are [like the Devil’s] neck, because they have the power to deceive. But such a power is vain; indeed, the weakness that my Savior and Lord assumed for me, which is called the weakness of God, completely defeated that power.” - *Commentary on Job* 41.13

[Quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament VI Job*, ed. Manlio Simonetti and Marco Conti, (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 216.]

²⁶⁸ “And who [is] he before Me stationeth himself?” Job 41:10b YLT

This verse is particularly significant in light of the opening chapters. Satan has come into God’s presence without fear. And presumably, therefore, without wisdom.

²⁶⁹ Placing Elihu firmly in his control.

²⁷⁰ “Leviathan poses a threat to the divine world. Pending a common emendation in 41:1(41:9), the text would read “the gods were thrown down (or: dismayed) at its appearance,” though, as it stands, the Hebrew ‘el mar’āw yūtāl could be translated “at its appearance he was/will be thrown down,” the “he” being the fisherman alluded to in 40:31–32(41:7–8). However, in 41:17(41:25) the ‘ēlīm clearly react in terror at the Leviathan: “at his majesty the deities (‘ēlīm) are in fear, at his crashing (mīsēbārīm) they are thrown amiss (yithāttā’ū).” In either or both cases, Leviathan would be best imagined as a Sea Monster in opposition to the divine world...” - Doak, Brian R., “Monster Violence in the Book of Job,” (*Journal of Religion and Violence* 3, no. 2, 2015): 269–88. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26671464>. p. 278

²⁷¹ Job 42:3,5-6 NIV

²⁷² Exodus 34:6

²⁷³ “Such are the seeds of the worst forms of Christianity, those that are centered on power rather than love, self rather than Christ.” - Atcho, Claude., *Reading Black Books*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2022), 45.

²⁷⁴ Genesis 47:21

²⁷⁵ Judges 8:27

²⁷⁶ 2 Kings 1:10-12

²⁷⁷ Luke 9:54-55

²⁷⁸ Numbers 20:7-12

²⁷⁹ Perhaps the greatest proof of this statement is John the Baptist, who *prepared the way for the Lord* without doing any miracles, but by calling people to repentance and pointing them to Christ.

²⁸⁰ 1 Kings 19:11-12

²⁸¹ Luke 8:24

²⁸² Matt 26:64-65

²⁸³ Zech 4:6 NIV

²⁸⁴ 1 Cor 12:9 NIV

²⁸⁵ Rev 11:17 NIV

²⁸⁶ Rev 4:11 NIV

²⁸⁷ Job 40:1-2 NIV

²⁸⁸ Chesterton, G.K., *Introduction to the Book of Job* (London: Cecil Palmer & Hayward, 1916) xx.

²⁸⁹ Job 42:17 NIV

11. Resolving the Impossible

²⁹⁰ Greg Boyd, “1 Christus Victor View,” *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*. (InterVarsity Press, 2009), 25.

²⁹¹ C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*. (HarperCollins, 2017), 254.

²⁹² Chesterton attacks this idea repeatedly, but perhaps his most profound description of the upside-down nature of materialist philosophy is captured in its reversal: “I knew now why grass had always seemed to me as queer as the green beard of a giant, and why I could feel homesick at home.” - G. K. Chesterton. *Orthodoxy*. (Waterbrook Press, 1994, 2001), 116.

²⁹³ “Thus the whole dramatic view was branded as ‘mythological.’ The matter was settled. The patristic teaching was of inferior value, and could be summarily relegated to the nursery or the lumber-room of theology.” - Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor*. (CrossReach Publications, 2016), 17.

²⁹⁴ “Any such modifying of the contrast between the historical grave of Jesus and the God of resurrecting glory, which in turn trivializes the shock and scandal of their uniting, refuses to hear the gospel story and obey its shape.” - Allen E. Lewis. *Between Cross & Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday*. (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001), 96.

²⁹⁵ “Since we do not appear to possess a word that expresses this opposite—I will call it Eucatastrophe. ... The consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous “turn” ... is a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so far is

evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.” - J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories,” *Tolkien on Fairy-Stories: Expanded edition, with Commentary and Notes*, edited by Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson, (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008).

²⁹⁶ “The temptation narrative (Luke 4:1-13) makes visible the confrontation of reigns.” - J. Denny Weaver. *The Nonviolent Atonement*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 36.

²⁹⁷ Luke 4:5-7 NIV

²⁹⁸ “He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David...to rescue us from the hand of our enemies...” - Luke 1: 69, 74 NIV

²⁹⁹ “The elements of cosmic confrontation and victory appear throughout Revelation, making the book virtually an extended, multifaceted statement of the Christus Victor image...” J. Denny Weaver. *The Nonviolent Atonement*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 20-21.

³⁰⁰ Rev 5:1-4 NIV

³⁰¹ This interpretation is supported by the prophetic imagery in Jeremiah 32:6-12 as well as the very clear statement in Rev 11:5, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”

³⁰² “Irenaeus’ real meaning would be more truly expressed by saying that God observes ‘the rules of fair play.’” - Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor*. (CrossReach Publications, 2016), 28.

³⁰³ Rev 4:11 NIV

³⁰⁴ Rev 5:2 NIV

³⁰⁵ Rev 5:3 NIV

³⁰⁶ Rev 5:5 NIV

³⁰⁷ Pugh, Ben. *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze*. (Cascade Books, 2014), 26.

³⁰⁸ Rev 5:6 NIV

³⁰⁹ Rev 5:9-10 NIV

³¹⁰ “We experience life in parallels: the formal and the dynamic, unity and diversity, form and freedom, the one and the many, and on and on. Great thinkers throughout history have wrestled with these parallels, asking, “Which one prevails in our reality?” From God’s limitless perspective, two realities can fulfill, harmonize, and dance with each other because they are creations of the unlimited Being, namely, God himself.” - Carl and Karen Ellis, “Foreword,” *A Supreme Love: The Music of Jazz and the Hope of the Gospel*. (InterVarsity Press: 2022), ix.

³¹¹ John 3:16a NIV

³¹² John 3:16b NIV

³¹³ Scot McKnight. *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*. (Zondervan, 2011), 33.

³¹⁴ “...the gospel is the Story of Jesus as the completion of the Story of Israel as found in the Scriptures, and that gospel story formed and framed the culture of the earliest Christians.” - Ibid, 69.

³¹⁵ “For the Middle Ages as well as for the patristic era, the Old and the New Testaments taken as a whole tell the same story of the same people of God. The story told by the Old Testament is not the history of Israel, it is already the history of the Church which begins with Israel. Thus the Old and New Testaments are considered in the Middle Ages, not as two collections of ‘books,’ but as two periods, two ‘times’ which echo each other.” - Leclercq, Jean. *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of*

Monastic Culture. (Fordham University Press, 1961), 80.

³¹⁶ Rev 10:6 NIV

³¹⁷ Rev 11:15 NIV

³¹⁸ Edwin Walhout, author of *Revelation Down to Earth: Making Sense of the Apocalypse of John*, represents a common counter-argument to this point when he writes, “John wants the churches, both then and now, to understand that this vision of the scroll and the Lamb concerns an event already past in real human history.” (p. 70) While I agree in the sense that that transfer of authority has already happened, the book of Hebrews seems to indicate that Christ is, until the second coming, awaiting a final placing of his demonic enemies under his feet. What that means ultimately I do not know.

³¹⁹ Hebrews 10:13 and Psalm 110:1 NIV

³²⁰ Hebrews 2:14-15 NIV

³²¹ Hebrews 2:17 NIV

³²² Col 2:15 NIV

³²³ “For the classic idea of the Atonement has never been put forward, like the other two, as a rounded and finished theological doctrine; it has always been an idea, a motif, a theme, expressed in many different variations. It is not, indeed, that it has lacked clearness of outline; on the contrary, it has been fully definite and unambiguous. But it has never been shaped into a rational theory.” - Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor*. (CrossReach Publications, 2016), 106.

³²⁴ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor*. (CrossReach Publications, 2016), 17.

³²⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (New York: HarperOne, 1980), 46.

³²⁶ C. S. Lewis. *A Preface to Paradise Lost*. (OUP: 1956), 96.

³²⁷ “God cares deeply about “making known” his manifold wisdom (Ephesians 3: 10). He wants others to see and savor it.” - Stephen Witmer. *A Big Gospel in Small Places: Why Ministry in Forgotten Communities Matters*. (InterVarsity Press: 2019), 70.

³²⁸ J. Denny Weaver. *The Nonviolent Atonement*. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 44.

³²⁹ Isaiah 14:15-16 NIV

³³⁰ Jeremiah 31:15 NIV

³³¹ “... a key ingredient to the ancient practice of magic/sorcery was to identify a spirit being by its proper, but often hidden, name in the spirit world. In doing this, it was believed that the conjurer gained mastery over the spirit’s power, much like a harness can rein in the power of a horse.” - Douglas H. Buckwalter, “‘Be Quiet and Come Out’ (Mark 1:21-28).” Unpublished. 2023, 17.

³³² Luke 16:19-31 NIV

³³³ Matt 13:24-30 NIV

³³⁴ Luke 10:30-36 NIV

³³⁵ Mark 4:3-20 NIV

³³⁶ Matt 21: 23 NIV

³³⁷ Matt 24:43 NIV

³³⁸ John’s gospel places this event before the triumphal entry, the most logical chronological placement. The accounts of this story in Matthew 26 and Mark 14 are probably meant to be interpreted as

explanations for the unfolding of the plot against him among the chief priests and elders. Matthew and Mark thereby make this anointing central to his betrayal. Matt 26:1-5 sets up the wicked plot, verses 6-13 are the chiastic hamburger of how that plot is set in motion, and 14-16 return to Judas, who is now conspiring with the temple authorities. Christ's unexpected type-scene anointing as king is effectively hidden when we force the narrative into a contemporary chronology rather than seeing it as a chiastic flashback.

³³⁹ John 13:27 NIV

³⁴⁰ John 18:3 NIV

³⁴¹ John 18:33-35 NIV

³⁴² John 18:38-39 NIV

³⁴³ “Shakespeare taught us—in King Lear, for example, or in Macbeth—that evil finally destroys itself, for it is the nature of evil to destroy everything. But, as he also taught us, on its way to self-destruction evil can destroy much else.” - Wendell Berry. *The Need to Be Whole: Patriotism and the History of Prejudice*. (Shoemaker: 2022), 437.

³⁴⁴ Paraphrasing and compressing Daniel 7:9-12

³⁴⁵ John 12:31 NIV

³⁴⁶ “Pride doesn’t just ‘goeth before a fall.’ Pride is the Fall.” - Leonard Sweet. *The Well-Played Life*. (Tyndale: 2016) 64.

³⁴⁷ Daniel 7:12 NIV

³⁴⁸ Job 2:6 NIV

³⁴⁹ Isaiah 27:1 NIV

12. The Fourth Man

³⁵⁰ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community is Found and Identity is Formed* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2014), 25.

³⁵¹ Daniel 2:48 NIV

³⁵² Daniel 3:2 NIV

³⁵³ Daniel 3:3 NIV

³⁵⁴ Daniel 3:7 NIV

³⁵⁵ Leonard Sweet and Michael Adam Beck, *Contextual Intelligence: Unlocking the Ancient Secret to Mission on the Front Lines* (Oviedo: HigherLife Development Services, Inc., 2020), 117.

³⁵⁶ Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 185.

³⁵⁷ Leland Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative*, (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), 42.

³⁵⁸ Gunn was my professor and creative writing mentor in the 1990s.

³⁵⁹ Daniel 4:37 NIV

³⁶⁰ Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, (New York: Convergent Books, 1980), 17.

³⁶¹ Daniel 1:8 NIV

³⁶² Daniel 6:10 NIV

³⁶³ “In order for a story to work, the hero must be relatable, which requires being vulnerable. The hero must reveal important things about him or herself in order for the audience to feel close to the hero. Often these revelations take the form of painful self-doubt.” - Todd W. Hall, *Relational Spirituality: A Psychological-Theological Paradigm for Transformation* (Christian Association for Psychological Studies Books), (InterVarsity Press, 2021), 200.

³⁶⁴ Daniel 3:24-25 NIV

³⁶⁵ Daniel 2:23 NIV

³⁶⁶ Daniel 2:28, 37, 44 NIV

³⁶⁷ Daniel 2:29 NIV

³⁶⁸ Daniel 2:45 NIV

³⁶⁹ Daniel 4:24 and 5:18, 21 NIV

³⁷⁰ Daniel 5:23 NIV

³⁷¹ Daniel 6:20-22 NIV

³⁷² Daniel 9:1 NIV

³⁷³ Daniel 9:19 NIV

13. One True Story

³⁷⁴ Craig G. Bartholomew, and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*, (Baker Publishing Group, 2014), 22.

³⁷⁵ Francis Thompson, “The Hound of Heaven,” *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse*, Nicholson and Lee, eds. (London: OUP, 1917), 409.

³⁷⁶ Revelation 22:17 NIV

Appendix A. The Tragedy Arc

³⁷⁷ Georges Polti, *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*, (San Diego: The Book Tree, 2016) 11.

³⁷⁸ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy (Faber Library)*, (Open Road Media, 2013), 151.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 157.

³⁸⁰ Ibid, 159.

³⁸¹ Ibid, 190.

³⁸² Seamus Heaney, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 211.

³⁸³ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein (Penguin Classics)*, (Penguin Books Ltd, 2006), Chapter VII, Loc 3965. Kindle edition.

³⁸⁴ 1 Sam 15:24 NIV

³⁸⁵ 1 Sam 15:23 NIV

³⁸⁶ 2 Sam 12:24-25 NIV

Appendix C. Why Stories

³⁸⁷ Gen 12:3 NIV

³⁸⁸ Dr. Timothy Valentino, “The Bond in Blood: Genesis 15:1-21,” Unpublished handout at Evangelical Theological Seminary THD Residency, Feb, 2022.

³⁸⁹ *Tardemah* is the same Hebrew word used when God puts Adam to sleep and fashions Eve from his side.

³⁹⁰ Gen 15:9-10 NIV

³⁹¹ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 65.

³⁹² Dr. Timothy Valentino, “THE BOND IN BLOOD: THE CUSTOM OF COVENANT AS A REVELATORY DEVICE FROM THE OT TO THE NT,” Unpublished handout at Evangelical Theological Seminary THD Residency, Feb, 2022.

³⁹³ Gen 12:2,3 NIV